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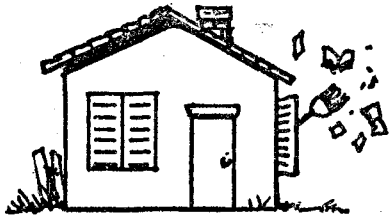

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THE WILL-O'-THE-WISP MYSTERY

Part Two: *The Rook*

by MR. X

WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE: When a masked gang hijacks a prison van and engineers the escape of six convicted criminals, Sheriff Barker and Inspector Fleming turn to David Piper, known as The Manhunter, for assistance. Piper, as Director of the state's Department of Apprehension, has numerous underworld contacts, but they offer him little help in this case. The six escaped criminals seem to have completely vanished, and there is no indication that the escape was planned by the most notorious of them, underworld kingpin Nick Bruno.

Tracking down one of the six, forger Joe Reilly, Piper finally locates and captures him at a small art gallery where he has been selling bogus paintings by Old Masters. But the capture of Reilly seems to bring him no closer to finding the other five or learning who was the brains behind the daring escape.

Piper tells Barker and Fleming that Reilly might have been merely a pawn in the scheme. Then a telephone message brings startling news to The Manhunter. . .

"I'm afraid the news puts an entirely different aspect on the whole case, gentlemen." He

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couldn't hide his deep puzzlement. "What I've just learned puts us even further from the solution than we were before."

"What is it?" Sheriff Barker asked, leaning forward in his chair.

David Piper was frowning down at his pipe, discarded on the desk top. "That was one of my contacts at police headquarters. A man was found shot to death in a hotel room last night."

Inspector Fleming nodded. "I glanced at the report on the way over here. What about it?"

"He's just been identified as Charlie Hall, one of our missing five."

"What!"

"Are they sure?" Barker asked.

Piper nodded. "With that bald head he's hard to miss. One of the detectives noticed the resemblance when they found the body. They just checked his fingerprints and it's Charlie Hall, all right."

Fleming was on his feet. "We'd better get down there. Want to come along?"

"I'd better." On the way out Piper said to Susan, "Take my calls. I'll be back after lunch."

It was a gray November morning, which did nothing to lessen the sense of sterile gloom that David Piper always associated with the City Morgue. He followed Barker and Fleming down the long tiled hallway of the old building to the room where the Medical Examiner was waiting for them.

"We'll be doing a full autopsy this afternoon," the man told him, "but I don't think there's much problem as to the cause of death." He swept back the sheet and they stared down at the body on the slab.

Charlie Hall had been 52 years old, of medium build and running a bit to a potbelly. He was completely bald, and only the black of his eyelashes stood out against the pallor of his skin in death. The blood had been washed away, but the three head wounds were all clearly visible—two in his right temple and one in his right cheek.

"A small caliber weapon," the Medical Examiner explained. "Probably a .22. Looks as if all three bullets are still in there."

"Powder burns?" Inspector Fleming asked, bending close to the wounds.

"Oh, yes. I'd say the shots were fired from a distance of not more than one foot, probably while the victim was sleeping. The body was found in bed, and there were no signs of a struggle."

"I'd better get back to headquarters," Fleming grum-

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bled. "I have to get on this right away."

He left them and David Piper strolled out to the parking lot with Barker. The air felt good on his face after the antiseptic odor of the morgue. "Well, that only leaves four to be found," Barker commented.

"True enough."

"Your job's getting easier all the time."

Piper took out his worn tobacco pouch. "What's the background on Charlie Hall?"

"Nothing special. He's been a gambler all his life. If they were still running Mississippi riverboats, that would be the place for him. Cards, mostly. Fast with his fingers."

"Arrest record?"

"Not in this part of the country, but the police knew him. Lately he's been engaged in a more or less legit business—running charter flights to Las Vegas for some professional people around town. Doctors and lawyers, mostly. They fly out with their wives or girl friends for a long weekend. Charlie ran the flights once a month. The suckers got their plane trip and hotel room for $200, but they had to buy $1500 in chips along with it. Charlie got a cut from the Vegas casinos."

"Sounds like quite a business."

Sheriff Barker nodded, sticking a piece of gum in his wide mouth. "It was. Big money."

"What went wrong to get him arrested?"

"That was a funny thing, and we never did get the full story. A few months back he reported a robbery to the police. A suitcase full of money was supposedly stolen from the office where he conducted this charter-flight business. Some reports had it that the suitcase contained over a hundred grand in cash. Anyway, it was never found and Charlie Hall seemed to be on the spot over it. The word around town was that he had to raise money fast. He tried to borrow money using some stolen stock certificates as collateral, and that's what we grabbed him on. I think Inspector Fleming himself made the arrest. The judge gave him five years on several counts of attempted fraud."

"Interesting."

Barker ground his teeth into the chewing gum. "Hell, let's not worry about Charlie Hall. You just find the other four the way you found Joe Reilly."

"But don't you see, Sheriff, I still need a motive for the mass break. A suitcase full of money could provide that motive."

"You think somebody sprang them all so they could

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force Hall to talk about the money? Where it is?"

"Stranger things have happened." David Piper suddenly made up his mind. "I'm going to ask a few questions around town. The killing of Charlie Hall, rather than putting us further from a solution, just might be the break we've been looking for."

In the early afternoon at the Winking Moon Tavern the crowd at the bar was likely to be more interested in the free lunch than in the drinks. It was not until evening that the place took on its true character, attracting third-rate grifters anxious to spend their day's earnings on neighborhood women anxious to help them.

David Piper came to the Winking Moon often, but always during the day. He would sit in the last booth on the right, hidden from the bar customers by the tall partitions, and wait for Tommy One-Eye to come in. Sometimes he would have to wait more than an hour, gingerly nursing a single beer; but Tommy always came.

Tommy, who had no last name that anyone had ever heard, was a drifter who had become, over the years, David Piper's most reliable paid informer. Often a single visit to the back booth at the Winking Moon had brought Piper the information he needed to crack a case. Tommy would sit there, his eyelid twitching nervously over his good eye, and tell Piper exactly where a missing man could be found, or where he might turn up the next day. Piper would nod solemnly—because one never joked with Tommy One-Eye—and slide a couple of folded bills across the table. The information, if Tommy gave it, was always accurate.

This day Piper had been seated in the booth for about twenty minutes when the stool pigeon slid in opposite him. He had his glass eye in place, and that made him look at least halfway human. "How's The Manhunter today?" he asked.

"Not so good, Tommy. I'm still trying to pick up the trail of Bruno and the others who escaped."

"I just heard on the news that Charlie Hall got it."

Piper nodded. "That's what I want to talk to you about. I had the idea he was strictly a small-time swindler, but I heard this morning he'd moved into the big time. Something about a stolen suitcase."

Tommy scraped at the growth of bristle on his chin. "He might as well have moved into the cemetery. When he

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pulled that suitcase trick he was a dead man."

"Tell me about it."

"Well, he had an office downtown and he's been running monthly flights to Las Vegas. They were popular around town with some of the wealthy swingers. The gimmick is that you get a cheap trip out as long as you promise to gamble big money. They do it all over the country, I guess. Guys like Hall organize the flights and go along, and the casinos take good care of them. When some of the guests run through all their cash on hand, the Vegas hotel is happy to extend credit. The way this works, when they get back home the swingers have to cough up the money to cover their losses. They pay it to Hall in cash and he brings it to the casinos on the next flight."

Piper was beginning to understand. "The stolen suitcase!"

"Right you are. Hall had collected from all the previous month's big losers and was ready for another trip to Vegas. Then he claimed someone stole the suitcase from his office. Could be, but the word was the Vegas boys weren't buying it. They told him he had to come up with the missing dough, and you can be damned sure he wasn't going to get it again from the suckers who'd paid it once."

"So he pulled the stock swindle."

Tommy nodded, his eyelid twitching. "Hall was too old for anything else. He picked up some stolen stock certificates cheap and tried to use them as collateral to borrow the hundred thousand he needed. That's when the cops grabbed him."

Piper mulled over it. "The fact that he tried to borrow the money would seem to prove that he was desperate, that he didn't fake the theft of the suitcase."

But Tommy was wise to the way of the underworld. He waved a finger like a professor of history making a point about the Hundred Years' War to a class of freshmen. "No, Charlie took the suitcase himself, but he blew the whole hundred grand playing roulette in the Bahamas."

"You know that for a fact?"

"I know it."

"Then any number of people might have wanted Hall dead—the Vegas gambling interests or the people whose losses he'd collected."

"Right—because those poor chumps still have to pay off their Vegas losses."

Piper pondered this new information. "It ruins one of

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my theories—that Hall was sprung by someone to lead the way to that suitcase. But it still raises the possibility that he was sprung simply to murder him."

Tommy One-Eye shook his head. "No chance, Manhunter. They could have hired a con in prison for fifty bucks to stick him with a rusty icepick. They sure didn't need to spring him to kill him."

"Did he have any Mafia connections?"

Tommy laughed at that. "A guy named Hall? You kiddin'?"

"Bruno has Mafia connections, and the Mafia's strong in Las Vegas. It's the first real tie-in I've had between Bruno and anyone else in that prison van."

"Forget it."

"Let's get back to the missing money. Could you get me a list of the losers Hall collected it from?"

Tommy thought about it. "Sure, I guess so."

"See what you can do. Meanwhile, I'll check a couple of my Vegas contacts."

Piper slipped a folded bill across the table to Tommy, signifying the conversation was at an end. Tommy pocketed the bill with a nod and slid out of the booth. The session was over.

Back at the office of the Department of Apprehension, David Piper hung up his coat and called out to Susan in the next office. "Any messages?"

She came in and stood by the doorway. "The usual things. Plus one unusual."

"Oh?"

"Your wife phoned from New York."

"Oh." He lit his pipe and considered whether to return the call. Jennie was a fashion designer who had her own life, her own career. He seldom saw her any more, and they hadn't lived together in two years. "All right," he decided finally. "Call her back."

Susan made a face and returned to the outer office. She didn't approve of career-minded wives who lived away from their husbands.

Presently the phone on his desk rang and he picked it up. "Jennie?"

"Yes, David. How are you?" The voice was still the same, husky and full of promise. He thought it was her voice he had first fallen in love with.

"Fine, I guess. As well as could be expected. What's new on the winter fashion scene?"

She laughed good-naturedly. "We're already showing the spring fashions."

"In November?"

"Of course. You never did understand the business, David."

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He sighed into the phone. Same old Jennie. "What can I do for you today? It must be business for you to phone me."

Her voice suddenly went serious. "David, somebody showed me a newspaper article about this case you're investigating—the six escaped prisoners."

"Yes?"

"There were pictures of the six, and I think I know the girl—Kate Gallery. Do you know her maiden name? Was it Kate Simpson?"

He flipped open the file by his elbow. "That's her."

"I thought so!"

"How do you know her?"

"I used her as a model a few seasons ago, for that bathing suit line I did. She appeared in all the picture layouts. My God, David, what was she doing in prison anyway?"

"It seems she killed her husband."

"No!"

"Blasted him right in the back with a shotgun. Nice friends you have."

"Do you have any idea where she's hiding?"

"Not yet, but I'm working on it. At first I was convinced the six of them were connected somehow, but so far two of them have turned up separately."

"David, let me know what happens with her, will you? It's very important to me."

"Sure, if you want me to."

"Thank you, David. Take care. I have to get back to my drawing board now."

"All right," he said into the dead receiver. She'd always had a habit of ending conversations quickly.

The street lights were just going on as he walked into the lobby of the Capital Arms, where Charlie Hall had slept his last sleep. It had been a high-class hotel in its day, but that day was 50 years ago. Now the lobby was littered with dirty ashtrays and yesterday's newspapers, and the faded peach paint was beginning to peel from the ceiling.

"You the night-desk clerk?" Piper asked the man behind the registration book. He was a slim Englishman wearing tweeds and pince-nez, and he seemed quite out of place in the setting.

"Is it night?" he asked, with a trace of British accent.

Piper sighed and showed his gold identification card bearing the Governor's signature. "I'm looking for Ronald Summerhill, the clerk on duty from five to one. Since it's after five, I assume that's you."

"That's me," he admitted. "But I've already talked to the police."

"I'm not the police. I'm

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special and you talk to me, too. You found Charlie Hall's body in Room 540 shortly after midnight?"

Summerhill took off his glasses and began polishing them. "That's right. He checked in just after I came on duty. Alone, under the name of Charles Ball."

"Not much of an alias," Piper observed. "Let's see the register." Summerhill swung it around and pointed to a line halfway down the page. Piper compared the signature with Charlie Hall's own as it appeared on his Wanted circular. There was no doubt he'd signed the register himself. "All right. Tell me the rest of it."

"Well, I saw or heard nothing more from him. Just after midnight the party in the next room, 542, phoned the desk and said she had heard shots in 540. It was a Miss Melrose, a schoolteacher who'd been complaining all day about her accommodations. It seemed she'd stayed here years ago when things were better."

As if on cue the doors of the single self-service elevator opened and a stern-faced woman with gray hair stepped out, carrying a small suitcase. "You're checking out, Miss Melrose?" the clerk asked.

"I certainly am! This hotel is bad enough, but I certainly don't intend to spend another night here and be murdered in my bed!"

Piper showed her his identification. "Could I ask you a few questions before you leave, Miss?"

"Please be fast about it—I have a taxi coming."

"Did you see or hear anything of the dead man before the shots? Any noise at all?"

"No, nothing."

"How long after the shots did you phone the desk?"

"Why, immediately. There were three quick shots and then I picked up the phone."

"Mr. Summerhill here answered at once?"

"Of course. And he came right up to investigate."

She started for the door and Piper had to yell "Thank you" at her receding back. Then he turned back to Summerhill. "What did you find in the room?"

"The door was open about an inch. Mr. Hall was in bed, shot three times through the head."

"You were alone? No house detective?"

Summerhill shrugged. "Our security man has a drinking problem. Most nights he doesn't even show up."

"If Hall was asleep, how did the killer enter the room?"

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"Those locks aren't worth much. Anyone with a strip of plastic could get in, provided the inside bolt and chain were left off."

Piper nodded pensively. "Let's take a look at the room."

The fifth floor reflected the same shabbiness he'd seen in the lobby. With peeling paint and missing light bulbs all too evident, he could well understand Miss Melrose's complaints. The door to Room 540 was still open, its wooden frame coated with the dustings of fingerprint powder.

"We've closed off this entire floor. Except for 542, the other rooms are empty anyway."

Piper grunted and opened the door wider. The room clerk flipped on the light switch and The Manhunter saw only a drab cubicle with a bed, a dresser, and one narrow window. There was not even the usual television set. Places like the Capital Arms didn't bother with luxuries. The sheets had been pulled back from the bed, but Piper could see patches of blood still on them.

"Did he have any luggage?" Piper asked.

"Not a thing except the clothes on his back. They were hanging in the closet, and the police took them away."

Piper stepped to the door of the tiny bathroom and glanced inside at the neatly folded towels. At least the maid service at the Capital Arms appeared efficient. "How did the killer get up here without passing the desk downstairs?" he asked.

"There's a back door and a service elevator. He probably left the same way."

"Did anyone ask at the desk for Hall's—or Ball's—room number?"

"No."

David Piper bit his lip and frowned. In a mystery story the killer would have been the departed schoolteacher, but things didn't work out that way in real life. "All right," he said finally. "Thanks for your help. I may call on you again."

He left the Capital Arms more puzzled than ever.

Susan was just putting on her coat when he returned to the office. It was almost six o'clock, and the place was empty except for her. "Oh, I'm glad you got back. Tommy has been trying to reach you. He left this number."

"Thanks. You go home now. It's starting to rain."

"See you in the morning."

He dialed the unfamiliar number and listened to the phone ring four times. On the fifth ring Tommy answered. "Hello?" Cautiously.

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"This is Piper."

"Hi, Manhunter!" His tone relaxed. "I got the list you wanted."

"Is this phone safe for you?"

"Sure. It's my girl's apartment."

"Oh." He'd never thought of Tommy having a girl. "What about the list?"

"These guys are all pretty unhappy with Charlie Hall. For my money any one of them might have killed him."

"If they knew where he was hiding," Piper said. "How many are on the list?"

"Seventeen names in all, Manhunter."

"Give me just the names of the big losers—the ones who had at least ten grand in the missing suitcase."

"That's easy. There are only three big ones. Dr. Gilbert Mendez, $34,000; Samuel Sloane, $28,500; and Marc Litzen, $12,000."

"Who? Give me that last name again!"

"Marc Litzen. Know him?"

"He's Margo Miller's theatrical agent. And she's the wife of Joe Reilly—the first of the six to be recaptured."

"Think there's a connection?"

"Either a connection or it's a damned funny coincidence."

"From what I hear, none of them cared much for Hall. They had him pegged as a rook, a swindler."

"A rook," Piper mused. And he'd already called Joe Reilly a pawn. Perhaps after all it really was a giant chess game.

"Anything else, Manhunter?"

"No, nothing else tonight, Tommy. I'll be in touch. At the usual place."

He sat by the phone for a long time, staring down at the three names.

Marc Litzen was working late at his office, and Piper found him there poring over airline schedules that covered his desk. He looked up, surprised, and said, "I didn't expect to see you here again. Haven't you done enough to Margo, sending her husband back to prison?"

Piper studied the beefy man as he took a chair opposite the cluttered desk. "This time it's about you, Mr. Litzen. Are you planning your next flight to Las Vegas?"

The eyes squinted at him from behind thick glasses. "So that's it. Charlie Hall."

Piper nodded. "You didn't tell me you two were acquainted."

"You didn't ask."

"What are the schedules for?"

"If you must know, I'm

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booking a client of mine on the folk-singing circuit—one-night stands at college campuses. I'm arranging his travel schedule. It doesn't include Las Vegas."

"The word is you dropped a bundle out there."

"Sometimes I win. This time I lost."

"You lost twelve thousand and they gave you credit. Charlie Hall collected it when you got back home."

"Collected it and lost it, the damned crook!"

"Did you tell him that?"

"I would have if I'd had the chance!"

"Would you have killed him if you had the chance?"

"I don't go in for murder."

Piper scratched his chin, studying the beefy agent. "Where'd you get the money to pay Hall?"

"That's my business."

"From Margo Miller?"

"I told you it was my business."

"Did Hall and Joe Reilly know each other?"

"I doubt it."

"Reilly never took a Vegas flight with you?"

"No."

Piper sighed and stood up. "Keep your nose clean, Mr. Litzen. You are in this thing deeper than anyone else at the moment."

"How do you mean?"

"So far you're the only one I've found who knew at least two of the six who escaped."

Piper left him at his desk and drove across town to the swank apartment house where Samuel Sloane lived. Sloane was a stockbroker, and with the market closing in mid-afternoon it wasn't likely he'd still be at the office after seven. Piper was right. He answered the door on the second ring.

"Yes?" He was big, but well-built—a handsome man in his mid-thirties whose eyes seemed to sparkle when he smiled a greeting.

Piper showed his identification card. "Just a few questions, Mr. Sloane. You probably read in the evening papers of the murder of Charlie Hall."

"That escaped convict? Yes, I read about it."

Piper edged his way in. The place was laid out like a lush movie set, with a thick furry carpet and floor-to-ceiling drapes. He must have had a wife in the decorating business. Or a girl friend.

"I understand you paid Hall a large sum of money to cover gambling losses in Las Vegas."

Sloane towered over him, seeming on the verge of denial. Finally he sighed and motioned to a chair. "Sit down, Mr. Piper."

"The sum I have in mind is

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something like $28,500."

"Your information is accurate."

"Charlie Hall collected this sum from you, in cash, and was supposed to have taken it to Las Vegas. He didn't, so you still owe the money."

"That's right. He stole it from me. It's as simple as that. But try and tell that Vegas crowd! He attempted to borrow it and got himself arrested. Then he broke out of that prison van and got himself killed."

"Any idea who pulled the trigger, Mr. Sloane?"

"Given the opportunity I might have done it myself. I threatened to, when I heard the money was gone."

"You're a very frank man. Did you kill him?"

"No."

"Did Hall get in touch with you in any way after his escape?"

"No."

"What about the other five? Ever do any business with them?"

"None whatsoever."

It was a blank wall of negatives. David Piper got to his feet. "I appreciate your help. I may call on you again."

Next he drove over to Raker Memorial Hospital, where Dr. Gilbert Mendez was on night duty. This interview, when he finally tracked down Dr. Mendez, was even more unsatisfactory. The doctor was a short dark-featured man with intense eyes and a trace of accent. He looked at Piper and they immediately disliked each other.

"Doctor, it's about this killing of Charlie Hall."

"I don't know the man. If you'll let me pass, I have a patient waiting in Emergency."

"You lost a lot of money in Las Vegas."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You deny paying Hall $34,000 in gambling debts?"

"I certainly do deny it. I'd be a fool to do otherwise under the circumstances. Now please let me pass."

That was the extent of their conversation. David Piper went back to his car and brooded. He brooded about Tommy's list and the schoolteacher and Marc Litzen. But most of all he brooded about towels.

At ten o'clock he was back in the lobby of the Capital Arms. It hadn't changed in five hours. The discarded newspapers were still in the same positions by the chairs, and Ronald Summerhill was still behind the desk.

"No business?"

The Englishman shrugged.

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"It was bad enough before. Now with the murder we'll be lucky if we can stay open."

David Piper leaned on the counter. He asked, almost casually, "You knew Charlie Hall before, didn't you?"

"Me? No, I never laid eyes on him."

"Ronald, Ronald! Am I to believe that a man who had escaped from prison, who was being hunted by every policeman in the state, would calmly walk into a hotel lobby—and at that a lobby littered with old newspapers probably containing his picture—and register under a name almost identical to his own?"

"Well, he did it, didn't he?"

"He did it because he knew you, Ronald. He came here because he knew you. He waited till after five to check in because you'd be on duty."

Summerhill took off his glasses and began polishing them with his handkerchief. "All right, I knew him. We'd had a few business dealings together. He came here and I gave him a room."

"One of your business dealings involved the loss of $8,000 in Las Vegas a few months back, didn't it?"

"Who says so?"

"I have a friend with a list." He should never have asked Tommy not to read the names under $10,000. He hadn't made that mistake the second time he phoned. "You paid Hall the eight grand but he blew it gambling and told you it was stolen from him. So you still owed it to the Vegas people, and $8,000 is a lot of money to someone in your position."

The handkerchief slipped from Summerhill's fingers and he bent to pick it up. "What does that prove?"

"That you murdered him."

Summerhill came up from behind the desk with a long-barreled .22 target pistol in his hand. He was fast, but Piper was ready for him. He knocked the gun aside and brought his fist up in a high arc that just managed to clip the point of the Englishman's jaw.

"You shouldn't have kept the murder weapon around, Ronald," Piper told him, drawing his own gun as he reached for the telephone. "That's what's going to convict you."

Inspector Fleming blinked his eyes and said, "Towels?"

David Piper nodded. "Towels. Among other things. Mostly it was the schoolteacher, though." They were in Piper's office the following morning, relaxing over coffee.

"I thought you said she wasn't involved."

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"She wasn't, but she figured very cleverly in Summerhill's scheme. Once I'd established that Hall and Summerhill knew each other because of the Vegas deal, I had to ask myself an even more baffling question than why Charlie Hall picked that particular hotel. I had to ask myself why Summerhill gave him a room directly next to the only other occupied room on the entire fifth floor. It's not the sort of thing you do to a friend who's trying to hide out from the police."

Fleming frowned over his coffee cup. "Why did he do it?"

"Because he needed the schoolteacher to alibi him. She'd complained about everything else, so he knew she'd be on the phone the instant she heard those shots. Before he went up to Room 540 with his gun, he simply plugged 542 into 540 on the switchboard. After killing Hall he picked up the telephone and heard Miss Melrose's voice calling the desk. He answered her, pretending he was at the desk when in reality he was right in the next room. Then he simply waited a few minutes and stepped into the hall, pretending he'd just come up. With a murderer loose he knew Miss Melrose wouldn't come into the hall till he arrived. In fact, he probably told her to stay in her room with the door locked."

"And the towels?"

"When he showed me the room I noticed that the bloody sheets were still there, but the towels were neatly folded in the bathroom. Are we to believe that Hall stayed in his room all evening and then went to bed without using a single towel to so much as wash his hands or face? It's possible, of course, but highly unlikely. More likely is the supposition that the towels were replaced before the police arrived. And that points to Summerhill, the only one who could have replaced them."

"But why?"

"The shots were fired from only a foot away. I assume some blood splattered on Summerhill—at least, on his hand. Or perhaps he washed off some powder burns from the gun. In any event, he dirtied the towels and then had to replace them. He had no choice, remember—he had to appear at Miss Melrose's door spotless, as if he'd just come up from the desk."

"It explains a lot of things—how the killer knew Hall was at the Capital Arms, how he entered the locked room, what he did with the gun."

Piper nodded. "Has Summerhill confessed?"

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"His lawyer has indicated that he will. The gun checks out as the murder weapon anyway. Why do you ask?"

"Sheriff Barker sent me a copy of the autopsy report this morning. Have you read it, Inspector?"

"Just glanced at it. Why?"

Piper picked it up from his desk. "The Medical Examiner found evidence that Hall had taken several sleeping pills. Not enough to cause death, but enough to put him in a deep, drugged sleep."

"Summerhill probably gave them to him so he wouldn't wake up before he was shot."

"Then why not enough to kill him and avoid having to use the gun?"

"You think up the damnedest questions! The case is *solved!* You solved it yourself. Don't go creating more will-o'-the-wisps!"

"And why didn't Hall put on the inside bolt and chain before retiring? Everyone always does, in hotel rooms, even if they're not hiding from the police."

"Look, Summerhill killed him. He's ready to confess. He had a gun in his possession. Ballistics prove it was the murder weapon. What in hell are you trying to say?"

David Piper leaned back in his chair, catching for just an instant a veiled glimpse of some shadowy opponent across an unseen chessboard. The pawn, and now the rook . . .

"What I'm trying to say, Inspector, is that Summerhill killed him all right. But look what Charlie Hall did: he went to a hotel where a man he'd cheated out of $8,000 was employed; he signed the registration book with a simple, transparent alias, then went up to his room; he didn't use the only door locks that might have protected him; he calmly took several sleeping pills; then he went to bed—and waited to be murdered. Does any of that make sense?"

"You think it's tied in somehow with the others, with the missing four?"

David Piper nodded. "I think it's all tied in somehow, Inspector. I think we're being maneuvered into making exactly the moves that someone wants us to make. It's all pointing toward something big. Something really big. But what?"

(to be continued next month)

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a *NEW* detective story by

LAWRENCE TREAT

à la Black Mask

A non-series yarn about a private eye who finds himself involved in a seamy, sordid case, with seamy, sordid characters, and who makes the best of it—as most private eyes do. Meet Rodge Kessel, a hard guy to con . . .

JACKPOT

by LAWRENCE TREAT

WITH AN HONORABLE discharge and some MP training it was a cinch to accredit myself and get hired by an investigative office. I figured it would bring in a few dollars while I was waiting around for that Park Department job, where my real interest lies.

The Darrel Detective Agency was the first place I tried, and Darrel took me on. He was a small dapper man with a glib tongue, and he could imitate anybody's voice and make all kinds of unusual noises behind his neat black mustache. Unusual, that is, for a man to make. He could bark like a dog and purr like a V-8 engine and jingle like a pocketful of coins. What he liked best was to imitate the bang of a cash-register drawer and follow it up with the clang of the bell ringing up a sale. He loved the sound of money with a deep abiding love that transcended friendship, honor, or trust in his fellowman—including me.

That, however, I didn't find out until later. My first impression of Darrel was something like my first impression of his office—clean although a little flashy, and on the small side with emphasis on appearance. You walked into a pint-sized anteroom with pink astronaut wallpaper and a receptionist's desk with a typewriter on it and a sign that

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read: "Secretary not in today. Please ring bell."

The bell was an old bicycle bell, the kind you punch down on, and there was no secretary and never had been. Darrel told me that after he'd hired me and explained why the salary was so low.

"I prefer putting you on a bonus system," he said. "If you do good work you'll come out much better financially."

"What do you mean by a bonus system?" I asked.

"Simple. Solve a case and you get a bonus."

"What kind of cases do you handle?" I asked.

"Mr. Kessel," he said. "Or maybe I'd better start calling you Rodge, since you'll be working with me. Rodge, how can I tell what kind of a case I'm going to get until somebody walks in here and tells me? Why, my next client might be—"

Then the bell rang outside, and he broke off and licked his lips. "Money," he said. "I can smell it. Go see who it is."

I went outside and saw a monumental, determined woman who reminded me of a six-foot cactus crowned by a great protruding tubercle, the equivalent of a chin. I must have flinched, because she began to say something, and hesitated

"Can I do anything for you?" I asked.

She nodded, and then she spoke in the softest, shyest, ripplingest drawl I'd heard in years. "You're Mr. Darrel?" she cooed.

"No, he's in his office winding up a case. A matter of some diamonds we recovered."

"Please find out if I can see him," she said, oozing sugar.

"Sure," I said. I figured that even Peewee Darrel liked to make clients think he was busy. "As soon as he's finished."

"I don't like to wait," she said, in that soft deceptive drawl.

"Good," I said. "I'll tell him."

"And tell him to hurry," she added, still sounding shy and still looking as if she could clobber me with a meat cleaver, and longed to do just that.

I went into Darrel's office. He was making little birdlike sounds, and he smiled at me. "I can tell by her voice that she's pretty," he said. "Any idea what she wants?"

"You'll find out," I said, and that answered both of his questions at the same time. I flung the door open and turned toward her. "Mr. Darrel will see you now," I said. "Come in, please." She stepped past me, and Darrel, looking as if he was about to faint, closed the door.

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I could hear most of what was said inside. In that dulcet voice she said her name was Mrs. Sadie Anselm and that she wanted a divorce from her philandering double-crossing rat of a husband. It seemed that he was carrying on an affair with a tramp by the name of Francine Harmon, and Sadie wanted us to get the evidence. And if in the process somebody happened to throw a little acid in Francine's face, she, Sadie, would be glad to finance the consequences, although she would in no way be party to anything illegal, you understand. She wished to operate strictly within the law.

"Sure," Darrel said. "You want to catch them in *flagrante relictus.* In *corpus dictum*, so to speak."

"*Flagrante delicto* is the correct phrase," she remarked sweetly.

"That's what I said," Darrel observed. "It's my accent. I studied Latin in Greece, and I use the Greek pronunciation."

"Mr. Darrel," she said, and her voice practically made love to him. "Do you take me for a fool?"

He ate crow on that one, and then they got down to business. He asked for a retainer of $500, plus expenses, and she said $500 would be cheap if Mr. Anselm and that little chippie of his suffered in the process. And besides, Mr. Anselm was paying the tab. Or would be.

When they came out, Darrel was grinning all over himself and he had a sheaf of bills in one hand and he kept stroking them with the other. He bowed her out, and then he turned to me and said, "Mrs. C. W. Anselm. Here's the address. Either follow her or go down to her apartment, or do it any way you want, but make sure she's really Mrs. Anselm. And then come back here."

"Sure," I said. "Do I get a bonus on this, along the lines we were talking about?"

"Have you *solved* a case?" he said. "This one, I believe, requires not a solution, but a dissolution." And he made a noise like a TV audience cue-carded to laugh.

I went out and took a bus to the Anselm address, which was a fancy apartment building. I hung around until Mrs. Anselm arrived, and then I checked her identity with the doorman. It was she all right, and he didn't have much of anything nice to tell about her. Or about her husband, either.

When I got back to Darrel's office he was still stroking his five C's. I don't think he'd seen that much cash in a long time and he hated to give up the lovely green things and turn

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them in to a bank. But eventually he managed. Only first he assigned me the Anselm case and gave me his instructions.

"Don't act too fast," he said. "Line things up, but wait a day or two. If you get a job done too fast, your clients think it's been easy. And we want to give every client his money's worth, don't we?"

"Just tell me what you want me to do, and when."

"Well, let's say you start in tomorrow. Follow Anselm and find out his habits and who this Francine Harmon is and when they get together and where. When you have it all set, follow them to their little love nest, and after they're safely inside, call this number."

He handed me a printed card with a phone number on it, and nothing else. No name, nothing to identify. I looked at it.

"What do I say when somebody answers?"

"Give them the name of our subject, the address that you've tracked him to, and describe the premises. They'll either tell you to wait around and be ready to assist, or else they'll tell you to go home."

"Who are 'they'?" I said.

"A firm of photographers who specialize in the kind of evidence we need. We use them frequently."

"Okay," I said. "But just one thing—about this acid throwing she mentioned, that's not for me."

He made a noise like a diesel engine approaching a crossing. "Think nothing of it," he said.

C. W. Anselm was easy to spot. He was a tall well-dressed man with curly gray hair and an air of success. He drove an expensive car, and when he wanted to park he went to the nearest lot, pumped his horn and, with an imperious gesture, stepped out. He expected service and he got it.

I couldn't decide whether I liked him or not. On the one hand, I sympathized with anybody who was tied down to Mrs. Sugar Voice, and I could even understand how she'd hooked Anselm. Plenty of people have fallen in love with a voice, and more than one man has proposed in the dark. So that much was clear. On the other hand, he acted as if he owned the world and liked stepping on it. Still, whether or not I liked him wasn't going to make much difference.

I figured that Saturday would be the night, and I wondered what kind of girl Francine Harmon would turn out to be. The fact that Sadie had called her a tramp was in her favor. Still, I wondered.

On Saturday morning C. W.

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Anselm played golf. He got back home early in the afternoon, and I parked near his apartment building and waited for him. He came out a little after 5:00 p.m., got in that white special job of his, and started uptown.

He drove conservatively and was easy to follow. He went up Broad and turned off on the 2400 block. He lazed along so slowly that I was afraid he'd spotted me and had some kind of trick up his sleeve, but he didn't pull anything. I slowed and let him get a full block ahead of me. He was still dawdling, and then he stopped opposite a house and blew his horn. After a couple of minutes the front door opened and a girl came out. I assumed she was Francine.

I couldn't tell the color of her eyes at that distance, but I could see that she had blonde bangs and droopy lips and that she walked with a wiggle. Believe it or not, it looked as if Sadie was right in calling her a tramp. I could think of worse names.

She walked out to the car, climbed in, and put her arms around C. W. Anselm. The kiss lasted about a half minute, and it took him a full minute to recover. Then he got going again, and he was still a cinch to follow. I wondered why Darrel hadn't done the shadowing himself. Why hire somebody and pay out good money for kindergarten work?

Anselm drove out to The Water Wheel, which is a fairly fancy restaurant on the site of an old mill. To my surprise he and Francine didn't check into the nearby motel. However, they did have a dinner reservation, and the head waiter bowed and ushered them to one of the choice window tables, overlooking the stream. I sat down at the bar and ordered a bourbon. It was going to have to last me a long, long time. Darrel had impressed on me that expense money could occasionally include a drink. But only one.

Anselm ordered cocktails and took a couple of sips, and Francine got up and wiggled herself toward the powder room. After she'd disappeared behind the appropriately marked door, he got up and approached the bar. He picked the stool next to me.

"I'm sure you know my name," he said. "C. W. Anselm. But I'm afraid I don't know yours. If you'd be good enough to tell me?"

I gave him a blank stare. "Why would I know yours?"

"Because you've been following me, and I know the reason. You're working for

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Darrel. I spoke to him on the phone and he practically admitted that my wife had hired him to get proof of adultery. Well, I'll be glad to give it. I want to make things easy for you. You've seen my wife, so I don't have to tell you why I want her to get all the evidence she can, and use it."

"Are you kidding?" I said.

"Hardly. My friend, I've been trying for years to get out of my wife's clutches, but she wouldn't give me grounds for divorce, she wouldn't sue me, and she threatened to contest any action that I brought."

"And Francine?" I said. "Where does she come in?"

"She's a slut. My last hope is that Sadie will get disgusted with me for going out with a call girl, because that's all Francine really is. I hoped Sadie would finally try to divorce me, and it looks as if my idea is working out." I still didn't say anything, and Anselm put out his hand and clutched my arm. "I want to help you out," he said.

I almost burst out laughing. "Okay," I said. "I'm convinced. My name's Kassel. Roger Kassel. And I guess we understand each other."

He took my hand and pumped it. "Great!" he said. "Roger, I'll do all I can. Just tell me what."

"Well," I said, "first of all, I have to hang around here for as long as you do, but I have the price of only one drink."

"I'll buy you another one," Anselm said reluctantly. Then he frowned as if a new idea had struck him. "Expect me to pay for your dinner, too?"

"Right," I said. "I can't go through the entire evening without eating, can I?"

"I guess not," he said. There was a menu lying on the bar, and he leaned forward to read the various items, but I noticed that he looked at the right-hand column only. "Have the pot-roast dinner," he said, selecting the cheapest item. "Their pot roast is very good."

"Thanks," I said. I figured I'd have the roast beef, and what could he do about it? "What are your plans for later on?"

"Francine's husband is out of town," he said, speaking in a low voice. "We're going to her house for the night. You saw it—187 Elm Circle, in Belleville."

"I'll follow you," I said. "Better get back to your table. I'll leave my bill with the cashier, and you can settle with him."

He slid off the stool. "Certainly," he said. "And you'll handle your own tips, won't you?"

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I looked him straight in the eye. "No," I said.

He shook his head sadly. "They won't like it," he said. "Waiters hate not getting tipped." And he walked back to his table. After a few minutes Francine returned and joined him.

Over my second bourbon I thought about what he'd said, and on the whole it made sense. Not that I believed him just on his say-so, but I decided to go along with him until I had some reasons to the contrary. And if this was one of those rare occasions when I got all the breaks, I was willing to accept them. And so, maybe to propitiate the gods of luck, I went along with him and ordered the pot roast.

Anselm and his sultry blonde left The Water Wheel about 8:30. They had a long drawn-out clinch in the car before starting, and he drove at the same leisurely pace he had driven a few hours earlier. I tagged along and thought irrelevant thoughts. But one idea persisted and was far from irrelevant—namely, that a girl like Francine doesn't bring the boy friend home to her own roost. She expects a classy motel, she wants to dance for a while and see some money spent, and she never, never takes a middle-aged lover home with her. Even if her husband is out of town.

But Francine did. The exterior of her house was the duplicate of twenty others on both sides. The interior was probably imitation brick surrounding an artificial electric log which, at the press of a button, looked as if it was burning. I assumed the rooms would be crammed with the best bad furniture from the nearest cut-rate store. Belleville and Elm Circle (no elms in sight) was that kind of place.

I didn't know what it looked like on weekdays, but I suppose it resembled other developments—children playing, mothers in hair curlers visiting each other or marketing or yelling at their children. But on Saturday night Elm Circle was something else again: it was a kind of American midway in the weekend circus.

There were parties going on, and people drove a block just so that they could park where all the other cars were, because that's where the action was. Radios blared and guitars twanged and somewhere someone drummed a drum and wouldn't give up. A few teen-agers raced cars up and down the streets, and the leather knights paraded *con brio* on their motorized steeds. You could have shot a cannon

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or committed a triple murder, and nobody would have seen, heard, or bothered until Sunday morning, when everybody went to church and put a dollar in the plate, and thought sacred thoughts.

C. W. Anselm parked in the driveway and then he and Francine got out of the big white car, walked into the house, and switched on a light. I watched them embrace before I went out to find the nearest phone and call the number on the printed card that Peewee Darrel had given me earlier in the week. I gave my information, and the voice at the other end of the wire said, "Okay, go on home," and then he, she, or it hung up. And when I'm told to go home, I don't.

I returned to Francine's house and hid in the shrubbery, but after a while it began to rain, lightly and pleasantly, and I got wet. So I went around to the rear of the house and tried the kitchen door. It was unlocked, as I later on found out the front door was, and I walked in. I was very quiet. I sat down at the kitchen table and waited.

There was, I felt, something distinctly not on the up and up. Furthermore, as far as the main actors were concerned—namely Mr. Anselm, Mrs. Anselm, Francine, and Darrel—I had, to put it mildly, no sympathy for any one of them. I was convinced that each one would be only too pleased to make a sucker out of me, and was maybe trying to. So self-interest as well as curiosity kept me there in the kitchen with my eyes and ears wide open.

My eyes didn't tell me much, but my ears did.

The first thing I heard was the front door bang open. I assumed that the photographer had arrived, although I wondered why he wasn't a little quieter. Then he coughed, swore in a loud voice, and started to sing drunkenly. When he called out at the top of his lungs I realized that this was no photographer.

"Francie," the man bellowed. "It's me, Joe, back home!"

He started climbing the stairs, tripped heavily on one of them, and yelled out again. "Francie, are you up there?"

Before I tiptoed to the kitchen door I took my shoes off, but I could have saved myself the trouble, because the clatter Joe was making drowned out everything else. Then an upstairs door opened and Francine came to the top of the stairs. I crept far enough forward to see her bare legs.

"Joe," she said grumpily, "you woke me up. I didn't

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expect you. What brought you home so soon?"

"You did. And who the hell parked his car in our driveway?"

"A car?" she said, still playing it coy. "In our driveway?"

"You heard me," he said angrily. "And get out of my way."

"Joe," she said, "you're drunk."

"Maybe," he said, "but you got somebody up here. I'm not too drunk to know that much."

"Don't talk to me like that," she said.

He laughed sarcastically. "Who is it this time?"

"Nobody. I just told you—"

"Get out of my way," he said again. "And whoever it is I'm going to carve him up into ribbons. Because no double-crossing gigolo can play around with my wife and get away with it."

"Joe!" Francine started to say something and broke off. I heard the smack of a fist. "Joe!" she screamed out. "Don't!"

I heard footsteps and then a chair banged against something. Francine cried out hysterically. "Anse," she yelled, "he'll kill you—he has a knife—here—take this—oh, my God!"

I heard the click of a trigger, and two shots sounded out. After that there was silence upstairs, and I could hear all the noises from outside. Radios and television sets were going full blast in other houses and cars were racing up and down the street, and I was pretty sure that nobody else in all Belleville had the slightest idea of what had just taken place in here.

Well, I stood there trying to figure matters out. Remember that so far everything had come to me through my ears. And it's hard to sort things out, particularly in the excitement of a crisis, when you've seen nothing. I'd heard voices. I'd heard somebody go upstairs, and I'd heard two shots, but after that—nothing. So, when somebody started down the stairs, I had no idea who it would be. I ducked behind the kitchen door and waited.

For some reason I didn't expect it to be Anselm, although logically it had to be him. She must have told him to go downstairs and wait.

He came staggering down, and he was obviously in a state of shock. He was carrying his jacket, and he stumbled on the lower landing. Muttering something or other, he turned and went charging into the living room. From upstairs I heard Francine on the phone.

"Get me a doctor," she kept saying in a loud voice. "A

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doctor—please—my husband—"

I ran into the living room and saw Anselm. He'd collapsed on the couch and was draped over the side of it. He had his head in both hands and he kept moaning. I noticed an extension phone on the table next to him.

Upstairs, Francine was telling a doctor to come quick and explaining why. I grabbed the downstairs extension and listened. She kept on talking, but the receiver against my ear hummed quietly, with the steady purr of an unused line. I put the phone down and reached to Anselm to shake him out of his funk. He looked up without recognition.

"Get up," I said. "I'm taking you home."

"I just shot a man," he said blankly.

I nodded. "Sure. Twice. I know all about it, so let's get moving."

"Yes," he said. "How much will it cost?"

I grabbed his arm and walked him out of the house to his car. I shoved him in on the right side, and I got behind the wheel. It was nice to drive a high-powered job like that, and I let it out along the turnpike. Anselm kept asking me questions, but I didn't bother to answer.

Everything I'd heard pointed to one conclusion—this was the old badger game, with a twist. The supposed husband interrupts and catches the sucker in the act, but instead of blackmailing him with a threat of scandal, which would have had no leverage with Anselm, they frame him on a murder rap. That was why the supposed husband had made so much noise going up the stairs. He wanted to give Francine plenty of time to warn Anselm of how dangerous a man he had to deal with.

Then, in the bedroom, Francine shoved a gun into Anselm's hands and told him to shoot. Which he did, with blanks, although he didn't know that. And I wasn't going to tell him either. At least, not yet. Because I liked neither Anselm nor Mrs. Anselm. Nor, for that matter, Peewee Darrel, who to my mind was behind the whole frame-up and had planned it with Francine. And I kept wondering whether I couldn't somehow get back at all of them. If I could, it would be a jackpot.

Before I brought Anselm back to his apartment house I stopped off at a cafeteria and took him inside for a cup of coffee. He'd gotten over the initial shock and was now able to think straight again.

"Kassel," he said somberly, "you got me out of there, but what good is it going to do?

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Francine knows me, all she has to do is tell the police and they'll come and arrest me."

"I don't think she'll tell the police," I said.

"But her husband's dead—she can't conceal that—she'll *have* to go to the police."

"Maybe he isn't dead," I said.

"But I shot him at point-blank range. I saw him fall."

"Just leave things to me."

"What can *you* do?" he said.

"I got you this far," I said, "and I can handle it the rest of the way."

He smiled for the first time. "You've done all right," he said, "and I'd like to give you a little something to show how grateful I am." He took out his wallet, studied it, and finally parted with a ten. "Here," he said.

I stared at the bill. A ten-buck tip? I couldn't quite believe it until I remembered how he'd told me to take the pot-roast dinner. Then it dawned on me that he was even tighter than Darrel. Anselm could spend plenty of money on himself, but on someone else, for services already performed? Fat chance!

"Want me to pay for the coffee out of it?" I said sarcastically.

He shook his head. "Oh, no. I'll take care of that."

"Thanks," I said. I shoved the ten-spot back at him. "Better hang onto that," I said. "And I'd better be taking you home."

Up to now I'd had maybe a smidgen of sympathy for him, partly because he was married to that Amazon and partly because he was the patsy. But after this ten-dollar business I gave up on him. Mr. and Mrs. C. W. Anselm—what a pair! They deserved each other, and I was going to see to it that they remained stuck with each other.

The next day was Sunday and I figured Darrel would contact Anselm in the morning and put the squeeze on him, so I phoned the Anselm number early. A maid answered and I said I wanted to speak to Mrs. Anselm. A few moments later her sweet cooing voice trickled over the wire. I told her who I was and that I wanted to see her immediately. She said all right, and I said I would come right over.

She answered the apartment door when I rang, and she examined me with the fervor of a cactus plant. "Mr. Kassel," she said in that dulcet voice, "please wipe your feet on the mat, and please do it thoroughly. I don't like dirt dragged into my house."

"Sure," I said obediently. "But tell me before I come

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in—is your husband up?"

"Oh, no, he's still asleep. He came home late and he seemed very tired."

"Good," I said, "because what I have to say is for you alone."

She led me into a living room that was as cold and stiff as an interior decorator could make it. All the chairs had plastic covers over them.

"So that they don't get soiled," she explained.

I sat down gingerly on the slippery plastic. "Mrs. Anselm," I said, "I followed your husband last night and I'd like to tell you something."

"Yes?" she said, almost chanting the word.

"Your husband isn't really unfaithful. He didn't touch that girl last night and I think that, instead of divorcing him, you should stick with him all the way. Never let him out of your sight. And if he ever has another affair, don't hire a detective. Just follow him yourself, stay close to him, watch him every second. Wherever he goes, you go there, too. Whether it's to a restaurant or a theater or a hotel, just be there, sit down near them, don't talk, but keep staring at them. It's your best bet."

"Why, what a nice thing to say!" she drawled. "I never really wanted a divorce, but it seemed that he was driving me into it."

"Just his way of doing things," I said.

"I'll make him suffer for this," she cooed. "Oh, the hypocrite!" Her voice sounded sweeter, but she looked uglier than ever. I got up and left. I felt fine.

I waited in the lobby for about fifteen minutes before Darrel showed up. He frowned at me and did a double-take.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded.

"Let me start by saying that the photographer never showed up last night."

"How do you know?" he snapped.

"I hung around and listened to what happened when you got there."

"Me?" he said. "You think *I* was there?"

"You put on quite an act, and I enjoyed listening. You used one voice when you answered my phone call and pretended you were the photographer, but you used another voice when you played the part of Francine's husband. You have a lot of talent, Mr. Darrel, although I must say your performance last night was a little on the corny side."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"I was there in Francine's

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house last night and I heard the whole business, and I've just been talking about it to Mrs. Anselm."

"What did you tell her?"

I hadn't told her about the frame-up, but there was no point in admitting that to Darrel. "I explained," I said, "that her husband thought he was in a little trouble and believed he'd shot somebody, but that it was unlikely he'd done any real damage, since the cartridges he fired were blanks. We talked about it for a little while, and it seems she's changed her mind about getting a divorce, so there's no sense in your going up to see her, is there? Because you might get into a lot of trouble, and Anselm certainly won't pay off. His wife won't let him."

Darrel thought hard. In his book everybody had to have an angle, and he couldn't figure out what mine was.

"You're fired," he finally said. "And now tell me what you're driving at."

"My bonus," I said. "Remember you promised me a bonus for every case I solved? Well, I solved this case and I figure that half your fee would be a reasonable amount."

"You didn't solve any case," he said angrily. "She hired us to get divorce evidence. Did you get it?"

"She doesn't really want a divorce," I said. "And Anselm doesn't want to be blackmailed for shooting Francine's husband and you don't want to lose your license as a private investigator. See what I mean?"

I don't know how I managed it, and I could probably never do it again, but somehow or other I made a noise like a cash register, bang, clang, and all. Darrel got the message. He knew I had the goods on him and that a police investigation of last night's happenings would put him out of business.

His face contorted in a kind of agony as he took a roll of bills from his pocket and counted off five fifties. He handed them to me silently, and he looked as if parting with each one of them had taken a year off his life. But all he could do was bite his lips, then turn around and walk away.

As for me, I stood there smiling. Jackpot.

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a *NEW* ghost story by

LAEL J. LITTKE

There are certain writers who often reveal a curious point of view, an unusual vision, an odd or offbeat sense of humor about what's happening around us in this fruitcake world we inhabit—such contributors to EQMM as Avram Davidson, James Powell, and Robert McNear—and we must never forget the late Gerald Kersh, Lord Dunsany, and Ben Hecht. Sui generis, *every one of them, bless them all . . .*

Lael J. Littke is also a member of this fantastical coterie, with an eye and ear entirely her own. Perhaps her stories are not always the general reader's cup of tea—but then originality is not always the most popular oolong or pekoe. Here is Lael J. Littke's newest tale of the "wondrous strange"—try it on for charm and chuckle, for size and sighs . . .

THE BANTAM PHANTOM

by LAEL J. LITTKE

GEORGIE'S SIZE PROBABLY had something to do with his getting fired from his job. As a matter of fact, it had everything to do with it. In the Official Rules and Regulations for Ghosting, Chapter 3, Section 17A(1), it states that an aspiring haunter must be of a size befitting the area he expects to haunt, which is only logical. After all, how could a ghost the size of a napkin expect to haunt the Metropolitan Opera House or Yankee Stadium?

Georgie was very small. He was so small that instead of wearing a sheet the size of a double bed—the way Oscar, the head ghost at Mrs. Pomeroy's did—or even the size of a twin bed like the one Gwendolyn, Oscar's wife, wore, Georgie had to wear a tablecloth. And only the size of a bridge table, at that. And even then a good deal of it floated behind him.

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Now, as you know, not all ghosts haunt houses. Most of the smaller ones are content with jobs like pushing out the peanuts in a vending machine or popping up the tissues in a Kleenex box. Georgie had several friends who were also too small to haunt houses—they worked in Grand Central Station lockers. They liked their jobs because it gave them a chance to meet all kinds of people.

Georgie, however, had higher ambitions. He didn't know exactly what it was he wanted to do, but he knew it had to be something impressive. Like being a house haunter. In a big house, and the larger the better. A mansion would be fine.

He never would have got the job at Mrs. Pomeroy's Fifth Avenue mansion if John and Marsha, two of the Pomeroy ghosts, hadn't eloped and left Oscar short of help. Georgie showed up the night of Mrs. Pomeroy's annual dinner party and in the confusion was hired without being measured to see if he met the specified minimum requirements.

But because of his hard work and willingness he was allowed to stay on for a whole year. His main assignment was to haunt the small bedroom in the east wing, usually given to children of visiting guests. The truth was, Oscar wasn't entirely satisfied with Georgie's work there since Georgie could not seem to carry on in the true haunting tradition. Instead of putting a good scare into the children by trailing spider webs across their faces or filling the room with hollow laughter in the dismal hours after midnight, Georgie spent his time whispering fanciful tales into their small ears after they had gone to bed. The little back bedroom became a favorite spot with the children and they cherished forever the memory of the delightful hours they spent there, although they were never quite sure what it was that had made the time so pleasant.

It was at Mrs. Pomeroy's that Georgie met Geraldine, a petite little ghost the size of a dish towel who worked in Mrs. Pomeroy's bedroom haunting one of her shoeboxes. She and Georgie fell in love and were married at a gala party in the furnace room one romantically dark and stormy night.

Georgie probably would have stayed on at Mrs. Pomeroy's forever if he hadn't tried to carry the heavy chain down the front stairs on the night of Mrs. Pomeroy's next annual dinner party, a tremendous affair which always took the entire ghosting staff. Everyone else was so busy that Oscar asked

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Georgie to carry the chain and follow him down to the dining room. They were planning to drag it across the waxed floors and see what that would do to the guests.

Everything went smoothly enough—even though Georgie was turning a little pink from his exertions—until he tripped. One of the stair-haunting ghosts swept past, causing a breeze that swirled Georgie's tablecloth around his feet, and down he went. He tried to scream a warning to Oscar, but it was too late. The heavy chain flattened Oscar, knocking him cold. Before he regained consciousness three days later, he had been laundered and used as a bedsheet for two nights. He fired Georgie.

Georgie broke the news to Geraldine gently, since she was expecting a handkerchief in a few months. She assured Georgie that she had great faith in him and that it wouldn't be long before he found another job, considering his abilities and brains. They bade a tearful farewell to all their friends at Mrs. Pomeroy's, pulled out the nails in the attic where they hung themselves to sleep in the daytime, and set out to look for a new position.

They could always go home to Dullsville, Pennsylvania, Georgie told Geraldine, and help haunt the coal mine in which his father worked. But they both agreed that to return to a poverty zone like Dullsville would be a step backward. Since both of them had become used to the nicer things in life they would try to find a position in another mansion.

Each day Georgie scanned the want ads in the New York edition of the *Ghost Gazette* and wrote stacks of letters of application. Geraldine found an easy job accumulating lint under the beds in a small hotel and they were allowed to live there until Georgie could find a job.

For a few weeks Georgie rented himself out as a tablecloth in a restaurant, a position he rather enjoyed although he regarded it as beneath his dignity. He whispered stories to the restaurant clientele while they ate. The place became a favorite eatery, especially with the arty set. However, when Georgie noticed that he was becoming somewhat threadbare from the constant bleachings, he left that job and worked for a while haunting a TV set in a wonderful dark gloomy little place in Greenwich Village. He wisely quit when he heard the lady of the house phoning a TV repairman to come and get rid of the ghost in her set.

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Georgie drifted about for several weeks doing nothing much except call at the ghost employment office each day to see if anyone had offered him a job. Dispiritedly he tried applying at some of the swanky apartments in Sutton Place, but was usually greeted with hoots of laughter and remarks such as, "Who needs a bantam phantom?"

Then one day there was a letter asking him to call at the home of Don Surly, the famous writer of children's stories. Georgie was elated until he found that the job was merely haunting a broom closet. But he hid his disappointment and took it. Geraldine was expecting her handkerchief just about any day and he couldn't afford to be choosy.

It can't be said that Georgie liked his new job, but he did it to the best of his ability. He was told to rattle the mop bucket and moan whenever the maid opened the closet door. Georgie discovered, however, that the maid, an elderly Finn, was practically deaf and noticed neither the rattling nor his moans. To add to his chagrin at being ignored, the maid snatched him one day, tore him in two, and used both halves of him to sop up the scrub water when she washed the floor.

Georgie was so depressed that while Geraldine patched him up in the cozy cubbyhole they had been assigned to under the stairs he told her he was ready to go back to Dullsville and haunt the coal mine. It was either that or be a rag mop the rest of his life. In true wifely fashion Geraldine said that wherever he went she would go, since she was willing to put up with anything herself, even a coal mine; but, she added sweetly, she wanted something better for their coming little one and certainly wanted it to have all the comforts to be found in a big city. Georgie sighed and decided to stick it out.

It was while he was on his way back to the broom closet that he heard a human voice. A loud male human voice.

"I can't go on," it was saying. "Nothing comes. I sit and stare at this dratted typewriter but my head is empty. I can't write any more."

Georgie heard gentler tones, soothing female tones. He followed the direction of the voices and slipped behind a door. Mr. Surly was striding furiously up and down his den, a booklined room dominated by a large desk on which sat an electric typewriter. Strewn about the desk were piles of crumpled paper.

"I'm drained dry," wailed

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Mr. Surly. "Empty. I can't conjure up a single fresh idea. I'm a writer who can't write any more. I think I shall kill myself."

"You don't mean that," said Mrs. Surly. "Give yourself a chance to rest and to fill up again with ideas."

"That isn't the way it works," shouted Mr. Surly. "It's been three months since I wrote a saleable story. I'm a failure, I tell you. We'll have to move out of here."

Oh, oh, thought Georgie, here's where I lose another job. He wondered if Geraldine could stand another move at this delicate time.

Mr. Surly stopped pacing and stared glumly out of the window. "I'll sell shoes," he said. "Or pump gas."

"If that was what you really wanted to do, dear," said Mrs. Surly, "I'd say all right, sell shoes or pump gas—if it were only the two of us to consider. But there are Billy and Walter and Peter and Polly and Edgar and Alice and Randy and Elizabeth and Peggy and Arthur and Jane."

Mr. Surly paled. "That many?"

Mrs. Surly nodded. She held up a little bootee she was in the process of knitting.

"Good lord," whispered Mr. Surly. He sat down at the typewriter. "I am going to write a story today or I shall blow my brains out. At least you and the kids would have the insurance."

"Don't talk like that, dear," said Mrs. Surly.

"Go away. I've got to work." Mr. Surly sat down at the typewriter and scowled ferociously at it as Mrs. Surly tiptoed out.

Georgie crept over and hung around Mr. Surly's shoulder to see what he had been writing. It was a children's story about a garbage truck that murdered a mini-car because the dragon that lived inside the truck told him to do it.

"That's not much of a children's story," whispered Georgie.

"Actually it's not much of a children's story," said Mr. Surly to himself.

Georgie leaned closer. "The garbage truck could be an unfortunate ugly old man who is suspected of violence only because he looks like a criminal."

"And the mini-car could be a rich playboy. By George," chortled Mr. Surly, "that's the first good idea I've had for months. I knew *something* would come if I kept at it long enough."

Georgie pondered a moment and then leaned even closer to Mr. Surly's ear. "Actually it was

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the butler who committed the murder because he was jealous. The ugly old man looks mean but he is really a kind and generous man who is good to his wife. Dogs and children love him."

"Originality; that's what they want," said Mr. Surly. Gaily he began to type.

Georgie stayed right there with him for several hours until the manuscript was finished. He didn't mind when Mr. Surly reached around and grabbed one of Georgie's corners, thinking it was his handkerchief, and mopped his perspiring face. Georgie regarded it as an honor.

Finally Mr. Surly pulled the last sheet from his typewriter. "Selma," he bellowed, "I'm a writer again. Come and read this story."

Georgie slipped out while Mrs. Surly was telling Mr. Surly how wonderful he was and that she had known all along he could do it.

"Geraldine," Georgie yelled as he floated home, "I've found out what I'm meant to be."

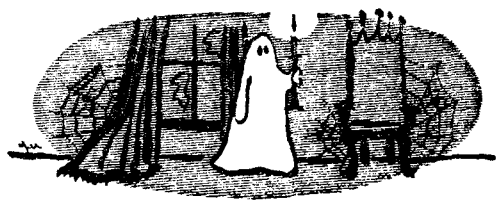
Geraldine met him at the door of their cubbyhole. "What's the matter?" she said anxiously. "Did your stitches come loose?"

"I've found my niche," sang Georgie. "Geraldine, I'm going to be a ghost writer!"

"Darling, that's wonderful," Geraldine said. "I'm sure you'll be a great success."

And he is, even though only he and Geraldine know that Mr. Surly gets the ideas for all his fine stories—the mysteries, the romances, the adventure and science-fiction stories—from Georgie.

Georgie especially likes doing stories about people who persevere.



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Have you, as a reader, ever wondered why mystery writers so often use pseudonyms, conceal their identities, refuse to make their home addresses known to the public? Why they so often protect their privacy by figuratively putting up signs that say: DO NOT DISTURB?

Yes, mystery writers might have a special reason for avoiding publicity and shunning the spotlight . . .

MYSTERY FAN

by JAMES HOLDING

THE EMINENT NOVELIST was settling himself before the TV set in his study when the door chimes sounded.

With a groan of exasperation he waved out the kitchen match with which he was lighting his pipe, got to his feet, and made his way through the hall to the front door, trailing aromatic clouds behind him.

He switched on the front-porch light and peered through the glass panel in the door at his visitor. The man standing in front of the door was a stranger. He appeared well-dressed, the novelist noted, showed a candid open countenance under the porch light, and wore the unmistakable air of a gentleman.

The novelist opened the door four inches on its chain and said, "Yes?"

"Are you Mr. Allen Gately?" Well-modulated voice.

Gately nodded. "Can I help you?"

"I've come all the way from Watertown Gap to see you, Mr. Gately. So you might let me in." This was accompanied by a charming smile.

Gately, however, was not so easily persuaded into indiscretion—not with the crime rate in Little Falls rising even faster than the population growth. He said, also with a charming smile, for he was usually an amiable man, "Where in the world is Watertown Gap?"

"Northern Pennsylvania, Mr. Gately. But couldn't we discuss geography more comfortably inside?"

Gately glanced meaningfully at the chain which held the door securely. "I don't know

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you. I've never seen you before. So what could possibly bring you all the way from Pennsylvania to Florida to see me?"

His visitor answered with another smile, this one even more beguiling than the first. "I'll tell you, Mr. Gately. I'm a mystery fan. A rabid one. Have been for years. And specifically, I'm a great fan of *yours.* My name is Daniel Storm." He held a small rectangle of cardboard through the opening in the door. "Perfectly respectable, see?"

Gately glanced at the business card: Storm & Jackson, Real Estate Brokers, Watertown Gap, Pa.

"Now may I come in?"

Gately unchained the door. "Please do," he said. The man's statement about being a rabid mystery fan had been unexpected, to say the least. It intrigued the eminent novelist.

Gately chained the door again and led Storm into his study. Storm, quite at ease, removed the black raincoat he was wearing and tossed it over the back of a chair. He sat down and allowed Gately to bring him a Scotch on the rocks from the kitchen. Gately switched off the TV, then sat down and relit his pipe.

"A mystery fan, you said," he remarked to Storm when they were settled. "And a rabid fan of *mine?* I find that extremely interesting."

"I thought you would." Storm sipped his drink, clinking the ice cubes.

"May I ask why?"

"Because the two claims I made surprised you." A half shrug. "And perhaps because they seemed mutually exclusive?"

"You surprised me, all right. What makes you think I'm a writer, Mr. Storm?"

Storm gave him another one of his disarming grins. "I had to do quite a bit of research to find out," he admitted. He gestured with his drink toward a nearby bookcase. "Weren't those books on the top shelf written by you?"

Gately said, "They were written by a man named Roland Dorsey."

"An internationally famous name," Storm said. "And it's yours. Your pen name."

"What makes you think so?"

"It's a little complicated, but I'm certain I'm right."

"Even if I am Roland Dorsey, Mr. Storm, I'm a mainstream novelist, not a mystery writer. Yet you said you were a mystery fan and a fan of mine. Almost as though you thought *I* wrote mystery stories."

"You do, Mr. Gately. Short mystery stories for the popular

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magazines. Under still another pen name. Robert MacBart. Are you ashamed of them? Or do you just have an unnatural passion for privacy?"

Gately gave the merest suggestion of a smile. "In either case it's really none of your business, Mr. Storm."

"Oh, but it is, I assure you. That's why I've come all this way to see you."

"Suppose you tell me about this research you mentioned." Gately was still curious. Storm was the first person in years to pierce the careful screen of secrecy with which he had surrounded himself. "How did you uncover this supposed identity of mine?"

"Oh, the simplest thing in the world. On the off chance that my favorite mystery writer, Robert MacBart, might be a member of the professional mystery writers' organization in New York—which is also quite famous in its own way—I telephoned the organization's headquarters and asked if they could give me Robert MacBart's address. I said I was empowered to make him a TV offer and had to get in touch with him."

Gately's eyes narrowed. "And what did they tell you?"

"That Robert MacBart is a pen name, as I said."

"They gave you my real name?"

"Not exactly. They told me that Robert MacBart's real name is Roland Dorsey." Storm was amused. He took another swallow of Scotch. "And the only address they had for him was the address of Roland Dorsey's publisher."

"Dead end," Gately said. "Because if you checked on Roland Dorsey, his publisher probably told you his real name was Robert MacBart."

"Naturally. But I wasn't to be put off that easily. This time I said I had a lucrative offer for one of Roland Dorsey's novels, for the movie rights, and had to get in touch with him immediately. What was his address? Where did they write him?"

"What did they say to that?"

"Said they didn't have any home address for him. They always dealt with him through his literary agent."

"Oh." Gately smiled.

"So I called his literary agent." Storm set down his half-finished drink on a table beside his chair.

"And what did you tell *him?*"

"Told him I was *you*—Roland Dorsey, that is—through a handkerchief. You see, I know all the dodges from reading your own stories. I said that recently some of my mail from him had been misdirected

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and delayed. I asked him to verify my home address in his records. Which he did. And he read it off to me to make sure it was still correct."

"What was it?"

"The address? A post-office box in Little Falls, Florida."

Gately chuckled. The man was persistent, you had to hand him that. "And how did you solve that one?"

"From there on it was easy. I came to Little Falls and hung around the post office until Mr. Roland Dorsey—you—dropped in to pick up his mail from Box 221—this morning. Then I followed you home and learned your real name from the wrought-iron sign beside your driveway entrance." Storm leaned back in his chair. "So here I am." He laughed.

Gately joined him. "You ought to take up writing mystery stories yourself," he said. "Yes, you've trapped me fair and square. I am Robert MacBart. And you're the first person to disturb my carefully contrived privacy."

"A real fan will do almost anything to meet his favorite author," Storm said, somewhat sententiously.

Gately was inclined to doubt that, yet he wanted to believe it. Privacy was all well and good, but once in a long time it was flattering to meet, face to face, one of your public, a reader who admired your work as extravagantly as this man evidently did. He said, "It's hard for me to credit that you went to all that trouble and have traveled all this distance just because you wanted to meet an author you admire."

"It's true, though, Mr. Gately. I honestly consider you the greatest concocter of fictional murder methods in the business. I've read everything you've published in the mystery magazines for years."

"Thank you. Actually, I write the crime stories for fun—a form of relaxation and mental refreshment that seems to sharpen my faculties for my more serious work."

"Whether you write them for fun or profit, they're really something!" Mr. Storm said enthusiastically. "I particularly admire your ingenious plotting—the clever methods that your villains employ to remove their victims and cover their crimes."

"My wife used to tell me I have an extremely inventive turn of mind in that connection."

"Your wife?" Storm seemed startled. "Is she at home? Am I to have the privilege of meeting her, too?"

Gately shook his head. "I'm afraid not. She divorced me

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several years ago. Said I neglected her for my writing to the point where it really constituted desertion. She also got awfully tired of my passion for privacy. And she was worried, too. When I first began to write mystery stories she used to be afraid they might give ideas to potential criminals."

Storm said, "I can understand that. But some of your murder methods would be pretty hard to carry out in real life, you know." He paused. "That Solomon Islander of yours, for instance, who tipped himself and his enemy out of a small boat in shark-infested waters, cut his own leg so that his blood in the water would draw sharks to the spot, then swam ashore, leaving his enemy, who couldn't swim very well, to be devoured. Wow!"

"That was an early effort, and quite far-fetched, I'll admit. Did you read the one where my murderer shot a dart tipped with curare into his victim with an old-fashioned slingshot? That was much neater, I thought."

Storm nodded. "I agree. But who is a good enough shot with a sling to hit a moving target these days? And for that matter, who in real life is going to have conveniently handy a supply of curare?"

Gately noticed that his guest's drink, neglected, needed freshening. He said, "How about some more ice in your Scotch, Mr. Storm?"

The visitor jerked as though a curare-tipped dart had just entered his own flesh. "Ice!" he said harshly, his urbane expression suddenly changing.

"For your drink," Gately said. "Your ice has melted." All at once he felt unaccountably cold.

"Oh," Storm said. "Never mind, Mr. Gately." He took up his glass, drained it, and set it down again. Then apologetically, "Your mention of ice just now startled me—it seemed so much like mindreading. For at that very moment I was recalling another story of yours, Mr. Gately. A very clever one about a killer using ice to cover up a murder. You remember that one?"

"Of course. Where I had a lawyer kill his partner by fracturing his skull with a bludgeon, then arrange it to look like an auto accident?"

"That's the one—on an abandoned logging road bordering a high cliff. The lawyer pointed his partner's car at the cliff's edge on a downhill stretch, put the dead partner behind the wheel, then placed blocks of ice in front of the car wheels to serve as chocks. Two

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hours later, when the ice chocks melted away, the car would plunge over the cliff. And meanwhile the murderer walked to the nearest settlement and established an ironclad alibi for the time the crash would take place. And the victim's fractured skull would then be thought by the police to have been the result of the car crash."

"You seem to remember that one very well," Gately said, puffing smoke.

"It was definitely one of your best. And one that seemed, at first thought, to be quite foolproof, almost good enough to happen in real life. For what could possibly go wrong?"

"Well," said Gately reflectively, "if you're asking me, another car could have come along the abandoned road unexpectedly before the ice under the car wheels melted."

"Highly improbable, given the kind of road you described."

"Or the car might have had an automatic transmission and been left in 'Park' instead of 'Neutral'—so that the car wouldn't plunge over the cliff when the ice melted."

"Do you think a murderer as clever as yours would neglect so fundamental a factor?"

Gately laughed. "I wouldn't think so, no. Well then, what if the lawyer had misjudged the time it would take the ice to melt?"

Storm shook his head, in great good humor. "You had your murderer conduct preliminary tests to determine the melting rate of ice. Don't you remember?"

"No, did I?" Gately said with interest. "I don't remember that."

"You did, all the same. Oh, that was a good plot. I tried to pick a flaw in it. Testing my powers of observation, deduction, what have you, against yours. That's one of the pleasures of reading mystery fiction, you know—the reader trying to anticipate the writer."

"And did you find a flaw in my melting-ice plot?"

"Yes, I did. But it wasn't easy. You had coppered every bet except one."

"What was that? I'll try to avoid it in my next story."

Storm said, "You didn't allow for the weather, damn you!"

Gately's eyebrows went up. "You do feel strongly about mystery plots, don't you?" He laughed, unoffended. "Well, that's what we all hope when we write them, I guess. Let me get you another short one." He quickly replenished Storm's glass in the kitchen, put the

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glass beside his visitor, and returned to his chair. "What do you mean that I didn't allow for the weather?"

"Suppose," Storm said, "that during the two hours when the ice chocks were supposed to melt away, the temperature suddenly dropped thirty-five degrees as it sometimes does in the Pennsylvania mountains? And the damned ice chocks failed to melt at *all?* And the dead man just sat there behind the wheel of that car for a week until the police found him—with a caved-in skull, no sign of an accident or a weapon, and a partner who had embezzled money and was carrying on with his wife?"

Gately struggled to maintain his air of calm. "Pennsylvania?" he said. "I seem to remember that my story was set in the Smoky Mountains."

"In real life," Storm said, "it was set in the Pennsylvania mountains." His lips twisted. "So you see your wife was right. Your stories *do* give your readers ideas. Faulty ones, as it happens. Because right this minute, Mr. Gately, I am the prime suspect in the investigation of my partner's murder up in Watertown Gap, and I'm going to be charged with it and convicted just as sure as hell. Because I did it."

Storm took a swallow of his drink and smiled his disarming smile before he drew from his jacket pocket a nickel-plated revolver.

"But first," Storm went on, "I'm going to fix it so that no other gullible mystery fan will be conned into actually trying any other murder methods invented by Robert MacBart. As you frequently point out in your stories, when you've done one murder, the second one is easier." He got this out with some difficulty.

Gately, halfway between satisfaction and panic, held up a hand palm outward. "If I have inadvertently got you into a fatal bind, Mr. Storm, I am truly sorry. Do you believe me?" He began to rise from his chair.

"Sit still," Storm said thickly. "Take it sitting down, damn you." He laughed—a forlorn, almost drunken sound—and raised his revolver. "Here's to Robert MacBart from one of his devoted f-f-fans."

Storm's hand, lifting the revolver to line up with Gately's breast, wavered. The finger that was curled around the weapon's trigger twitched once, infinitesimally, but the revolver did not speak.

Mopping sweat from his upper lip with his handkerchief, Gately walked over to his

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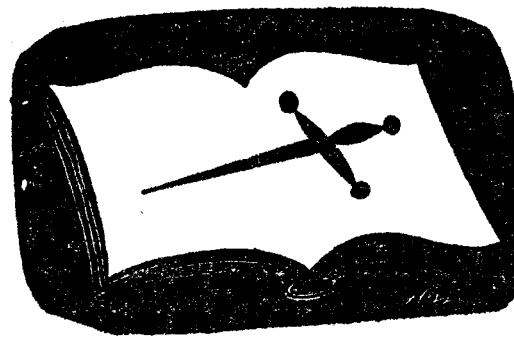
visitor and gently took the gun out of his hand.

"What—wha—?" said Mr. Storm.

"Just another of my plot twists," Gately answered. "Knockout drops in your Scotch. I dropped them into your drink when I put fresh ice in it. But don't you think it points up rather neatly the irony of our situation, Mr. Storm? A mystery writer's life endangered by some ice that didn't melt, then saved by some ice that did?"

Storm did not hear Gately's final words. Eyes glazed, sinews flaccid, he collapsed in his chair, as inert as a sack of sand.



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DISCOVERY

an "unknown" Tictocq story by

O. HENRY

O. Henry's real name was William Sydney Porter. He was born in 1862 in Greensboro, North Carolina, left school at the age of 15, and worked for five years in his uncle's drug store in Greensboro. In 1882 he went to Texas for his health, and between 1884 and 1894, in Austin, he earned his living as a clerk, bookkeeper, draftsman, and bank teller. In 1894 he bought Brann's "Iconoclast," which he retitled "The Rolling Stone." It was in this short-lived humorous weekly that some of O. Henry's early sketches, stories, and poems appeared.

Among his own contributions to "The Rolling Stone" was a series of stories about "The Great French Detective." In these flagrant, fragrant parodies of Vidocq, O. Henry hit upon an inspired name for his detective—Tictocq. So far as we have been able to check, only two Tictocq stories have been published in O. Henry's 17 books—"Tictocq" and "Tracked to Doom," both in ROLLING STONES *(1912), the latter a case in which Tictocq is not only the eyewitness of a murder but also hears the murderer's confession, and yet "the murderer of Marie Cusheau was never discovered." (Tie that for detective perspicacity if you can!)*

We now offer you a tale of Tictocq which was first published in the June 23, 1894 issue of "The Rolling Stone" and has never appeared in print since. It is typical of the Tictocq series—a "condensed novel" of outrageous 'tec tomfoolery. (Only some of the original typographic errors have been corrected.) So, enjoy a "new," hitherto "unknown" O. Henry story—lost to devotees of detection and sleuthian students lo these 77 years. . .

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TICTOCQ,

The Great French Detective;

or,

The Murder in Rue St. Bonjour

CHAPTER I

"MAKE WAY, MESsieurs; make way for the great Tictocq."

It is midnight in Paris.

In the salon of the concierge in the Rue St. Bonjour a gaping crowd of grisettes, gens d'arme, and bourgeoise stand around the body of a murdered man.

Tictocq, the great French detective, pushes his way through the crowd and kneels by the corpse.

"Ventre St. Gris," says Flaubert, the rag picker.

"Mille tonnerre mon ami je suis petit bon toadstools en fin de frogs' legs," answers old Marie Bonfallong, the daughter of Grisi Tonjours, the street sprinkler.

"Tiens! will you be quiet, canaille?" says Tictocq.

"Be quiet, vraiment!" hisses Gaspard de Toot, the gendarme. "Tictocq has found a clue."

The great detective closely examines the body of the murdered man, and enters the following memoranda in his pocketbook:

"Stranger; age about forty years; about five feet ten in height; hair dark; left eyebrow missing; linen marked E.J.; cause of death, violent concussion over left temple; residence, politics, religion and favorite poet unknown."

On the table in the salon is a plate of butter.

Tictocq carefully examines the plate and draws forth a long, glittering, golden hair.

"Mon Dieu," he says, holding it up. "In three days I will deliver the murderer to Monsieur le Prefect of the Police. Clear the room!"

The bourgeoise, the canaille, and the sans-culottes are driven from the salon.

The captain of the gens d'arme and Tictocq the detective follow, carefully locking the door behind them.

When they have gone the murdered man rises to his feet, places a long black hair in the butter, laughs a low, sardonic laugh, and goes out the back door.

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CHAPTER II

It is the next night.

The banqueting hall of the Prince Bonbonette is magnificently lit with lights.

In the antechamber the Chevalier Du Nord and Father Roguin, the famous bon-vivant priest from the cathedral of Honi soit qui mal y pense, have just taken off the limit.

The guests are at supper.

The gold and silver plate on the table must have cost over $76.

About the center of the long table, just beginning to cut open a can of sardines with a silver jeu d'esprit, sits the most beautiful woman in France.

It is the Countess Villiers.

She has all the wild seductive grace, the abandon, the bonhomie, the University-girl-at-a-football-game empressement that one seldom sees outside of the Champs Elysées, or the Sixth Ward, Austin, Texas.

Her hair of a beautiful lustrous golden hue hangs down her back in long, undulating, shimmering waves.

The company is the most famous that Paris can produce.

Among the guests are Madame Tully, Madam Duke, Napoleon IV, Madame Ruppert, and Lydia Pinkham.

Every few minutes the Prince touches a silver gong, and servants enter bearing freshly cut watermelons and patty for grass.

The conversation is the most brilliant to be found in any Parisian salon. Wit, satire, bon mots, repartee, and epigrams fly upon the air as a new keg comes in from the Faubourg St. Germain brewery.

"Voilà! Madame Tully," says the Prince, shaking his jeweled hand back at one of the most beautiful ladies of the court, "you have only eaten three watermelons. What is it Rousseau says: 'Bong le bong, bong, bunghole gehaben?"

"Diable, Mon Prince," replies the madame, "you flatter me! I am not rien de plus cubebs. I believe what Montesqueioux says is true—'Scratchez vous mon back, and I'll scratchez votre. Nicht wahr?' "

"Ah, madame," laughs the Prince. "I know you of old. There is no putting the kibosh on you."

The Abbé Meatmarquette is relating some delicious morceau to the Duchess Camusot. She is listening with the utmost enjoyment, her eyes sparkling, with a piece of watermelon in her hand and one foot on his chair.

"Monsieur l'Abbé, you are too funny for anything," laughs the Duchess. "But come! where do you get all this knowledge of the gay and fashionable under-

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current of our most exclusive Parisian circles? You are better informed than the Revieu de Deux Mondes, or the Figaro itself, and you à soi distant and entre nous father in the church. Where do you get all this fund of information?"

"Parbleu, madame, where else but in the New York Sunday World?"

"Mes enfants," says the Prince, rising, "the dancing hall awaits us, and Terpsichore will probably jolt some of this watermelon down for us. Allons à la dans."

The Prince is approaching the Countess Villiers with the intention of asking her hand for the cakewalk, when the doors are suddenly burst in and 127 gens d'arme enter the salon with Tictocq, the famous French detective, at their head.

"Fi donc, messieurs. What means this intrusion?" says the Prince, reaching back for his hip pocket.

"En le nom de l'Empereur," says Tictocq. He draws from his pocketbook a long golden hair and compares it with that of the Countess Villiers.

"Madame la Comtesse, you are my prisoner," says Tictocq.

"On what charge?" asks the Countess, cooly picking her teeth with a corkscrew.

"The murder of a stranger in the Rue St. Bonjour yesterday."

"Your proofs?"

"This hair was found in the butter on the table by the murdered man."

The Countess laughs.

"Regardez vous, Monsieur Tictocq," she says, removing her hair and handing it to the detective. "I bought this hair in the Rue St. Montmartre at four o'clock this afternoon."

"Foiled again!" hisses Tictocq, taking a watermelon under his arm and leaving the salon.

CHAPTER III

The office of the Prefecture of Police.

Several gens d'arme stand about the room.

The stage manager, call boy, and all the supes are arranged R. and L. as audience.

Suddenly the door opens and the great Tictocq enters with a prisoner.

"Qui est votre ami?" says the Prefect.

"The murderer of the stranger in the Rue St. Bonjour."

A murmur of admiration runs around the room.

The gens d'arme hope for the day when they will become world-renowned detectives like the great Tictocq.

"Can you prove an alibi?" asks the Prefect of the prisoner.

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"No, monsieur."

"Were you drunk?"

"No, monsieur."

"Had your victim provoked you in any way?"

"No, monsieur."

"Mon Dieu! what cold-blooded savagery. Away with him to the Bastille."

"Hold!" says the captain of the gens d'arme. "There is one thing in the prisoner's favor that should be considered."

"What is that?" asks Tictocq with a dark frown.

"He is the murdered man himself."

"Is this true?" asks the Prefect.

"It is," says the prisoner.

Tictocq draws himself up proudly.

"Monsieur le Prefect," he says, "have I ever failed in bringing a criminal to justice?"

"Not this week, anyhow," says the Prefect.

"Then," says Tictocq, "is not my word better than that of a man who murders himself and then escapes?"

"Ma foi, certainement," says the Prefect. "Away with the prisoner to the Bastille."

"Parbleu!" say the gens d'arme one to another. "Is there another in the world like the great Tictocq?"

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a NEW crime story by

FLORENCE V. MAYBERRY

A strange story—but then every story that Florence V. Mayberry has written for EQMM has been a strange one . . . Like Lael J. Littke, Florence V. Mayberry has an odd and beguiling point of view, a "different" kind of vision of people and how they think and what they do. These are rare qualities—and we should cherish them. .

THE BEAUTY IN THAT HOUSE

by FLORENCE V. MAYBERRY

So.

Willie. And me.

At least, I hope it will turn out that way. Just Willie and me.

William doesn't suit him as a name. But then neither does Willie. But he enjoys the nickname. It sounds affectionate.

Willie has this big beautiful house. Filled with trinkets—at least, that's what he calls them. Like a Chinese lion maybe 5000 years old. Russian ikons from the Czar's court. A shaving mug once used by Franz Josef of Austria. Paintings, carvings, illuminated manuscripts. Satin-hung walls. Not wallpaper made to look like satin—real brocaded satin. The candelabrum on Willie's piano doesn't have crystal drops; the drops are jewels. All this is just a start. Those are just the few things I noticed the first night I went to Willie's house for dinner.

Willie gave me the creeps. Oh, he looked good. Too good. His hair had that new fluffy cut, the one achieved when the hair is blown, snipped, then blown and sprayed. It covers any bald spot. Not that Willie was anywhere near bald. Willie had lots of hair, the sandy-blond kind that happens when gray gets mixed in. His eyes were almost as pale. His mouth was well shaped, but when he wasn't talking he held it as if he had just bit in half an hors

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d'oeuvre about the size of a dime. But when he talked, his mouth opened full and looked fine. His words came out big and round like an elocution teacher's.

His chest was deep. But it didn't look strong and virile. Pouter-pigeon. He was tall, with plenty of flesh on him. But it didn't make him look strong. More like a hothouse plant that has been overforced. Like I said, Willie gave me the creeps.

But his house and all the beautiful things in it didn't. Willie knew all about them. Their history. Why they were valuable. How they were made and who made them. I finished high school at night classes—in my twenties, while working in the daytime to support a sick husband. They didn't have anything in those night classes about jewels and paintings and the history of art. So all I knew was that when I looked at Willie's treasures chills went up my spine. And I got a funny crying sensation in the pit of my stomach from the way the soft light of a lamp—alabaster, Willie called it—fell across the painting of a woman whose throat seemed to throb in the glow. I would have sworn, almost, she had a pulse. And the old polished chest with the inlaid design—I felt I had to rub it. When I did, Willie smiled, showing two pointed rat teeth, and he said, yes, rub it, that shows true appreciation, get the feel of the artist in your fingers.

What he said was right. A feeling came into me, as though I had made the chest myself. Then Willie handed me a small jade walnut. A thousand years old, he said. Hold it, he said, rub it; thirty generations more or less of Chinese aristocrats have rubbed that walnut and soothed away their tensions. And now so did he. Well, that did it. The jade had a lovely smooth cool touch. But Willie was all over it. When he turned his back to show me something else I put it down.

So how would it be to touch Willie?

Can you believe it?—Willie's personal bathroom had walls of mother-of-pearl. At least, they looked like that. There was a deep white rug all over the floor, and a painting baked in the porcelain of his wash basin. And me with cheap prints in cheap frames on my living-room walls.

Willie's bedroom looked like the pictures in *House Beautiful* —only better because I was actually in the room, my feet sinking into the Chinese rug. The big bed had a black lacquered headboard. On one side was a large lacquered chest, on the other was an inlaid

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writing cabinet. French, made at the time the wealthy French went all out for Chinese objets d'art. On top of the desk was a figurine of a Chinese lady I could have kissed, she was so elegant and pure and lovely. "Pick her up. Touch her," Willie urged.

A man with all that money should have had those rat teeth filed off and capped. "Do you," I asked, "touch her?"

"Indeed I do," Willie said. "She is my darling, my lovely. She's a court lady of China, you know. Oh, what fun I'll have teaching you about my beauties! You'll make an apt student, my dear."

He reached for me. But I slid away as though the sudden sight of a framed Chinese scroll was just too much for me, as though I had to get to it fast and lose myself in it. Just for a minute I wished I could dive into Willie's swimming pool which was just outside his bedroom, beyond sliding glass doors. Only that wouldn't have been possible. Two beautiful boys, maybe twenty or twenty-one, were swimming in it. They were good swimmers, tall, strong, gleaming boys, tanned to a sun-gold. They would have rescued me. Because Willie would tell them to. Not because they wanted to.

Willie came behind me and put his hands on my shoulders. It felt as if little worms were crawling up and down my arms. "You're as lovely as my figurine, Courtney. And how that name suits you, my darling. It's so regal, so aristocratic."

"I'm not an aristocrat," I said. "My people came from the hill country of Kentucky. It's an old family name. I always hated it because it's a boy's name, and I'm a girl."

"Who wants a silly girl's name?" he said. "You're not a silly girl. You're an exquisite mature woman. You will look so right as hostess of this house. A lovely jewel." He didn't add "in an exquisite setting," but that's what he meant. And he'd make me into that jewel. With his money.

I turned and faced him. "Willie, I have to be honest. To be comfortable with myself. I don't love you. But I love this beauty. I've never had it. Only cheap imitations."

"How wonderful that you can have it now," Willie said. "Now I'll show you the room that will be yours. If you want it redecorated, we'll do it. But it is done in exquisite taste. It was my sister's."

Willie's sister had died, oh, maybe a month before he began asking me out. He'd known me for a year or so before that, but

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I was only the clerk who usually waited on him at the book store.

That same week, after he had shown me my room, Willie and I were married. Willie wanted to make a big thing of it, invite everybody who was anybody for miles around. But I said no. I didn't want to be shown off. So we had a civil ceremony in another state. Nobody we knew—not even the two golden boys, Ferdie and Maurice—was present.

I wonder if anyone who hasn't had yearnings like mine and squelched them all her life could understand the way I felt when I went to live in Willie's house. Even the way the light shone through the thin, thin Irish Balique china cups at tea time made me shiver. Before I married Willie I had one cup and saucer nearly that thin. I used it when I wanted to cheer myself up. Finally the cup cracked and then it looked like any other piece of the thrift-store china I was always picking up. Willie's house had two whole sets of Balique.

I suppose a woman of forty-three ought to have had by that age more of the things she has always wanted. But I was a widow with no training for a job, other than selling things. And not anything special at that. Just a low-keyed salesclerk, which is why I fitted well in book stores. So I satisfied my yearnings by reading books about beauty, and looking at beautiful things in stores and museums. I could sew and had a knack for style. Willie noticed that when he came in the store to buy books, usually accompanied by Ferdie or Maurice. But after his sister died, Willie began to come in alone. Next thing I knew I was having dinner at Willie's house, with two Filipino servants waiting on us. Willie was shopping for a woman in his household.

I hated myself for being Willie's front. Not Willie, I didn't hate him—in part I was grateful to him. I just hated me. Ferdie and Maurice helped out with that. They hated me, too—especially Ferdie.

One day when I thought they were all away I decided to take a swim. The swim was more than a luxury, it was therapeutic. But I never used the pool if the boys were around. Their eyes had taken on a veiled laughing look the one time I came out in my bathing suit in front of them. But who could blame them? One leg thin and twisted from the polio I'd had as a teen-ager. The fact that the rest of me was round and slender and well put together didn't hide that leg.

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While I was swimming, Ferdie suddenly came into the pool area. Well, my bad leg couldn't be seen in the water. So I waved at Ferdie and kept on swimming. I figured he would leave. He couldn't stand me. Instead he came to the pool's edge. "Could I speak with you, Mrs. McKinley?"

I stopped swimming, stood up in the water. "Yes?"

"Please. Come over here, the servants might be listening," he said, beckoning to me. I swam to him. He reached down his beautiful muscled arm. And suddenly I was yanked up on the side of the pool. "It will be easier to talk up here," he said, smiling, but his eyes like flames on dark coals.

I was miserable and awkward, knowing how my leg looked. I turned quickly to reach for my robe. Ferdie told Willie later that I slipped. But if I had slipped, bent as I was to pick up the robe, the bump would have been on the front of my head, not on the back.

Ferdie said that as I fell I struck my head on the pool's edge, then sank in the water.

"Ferdie knocked me into the pool. He banged me on the head with something first," I told Willie when I was up to talking. "If you hadn't come home when you did, Ferdie would have left me in the pool to drown." Both Willie's bedroom and mine had two sets of sliding glass doors, one set opening into the pool area, the other set into the patio. Willie came into his bedroom just after I fell, saw Ferdie staring down—shocked, Ferdie explained—rushed out and ordered Ferdie in after me. "He would have told you I fell in while no one was around. Or that he didn't know anything about it."

Willie's eyes clicked. Like a computer putting things into place. Don't ever think Willie wasn't intelligent. He had a supermind. I don't know what he said to Ferdie. But Ferdie went away for a while. When he came back he moved out of the main house into the garden guesthouse. There was a kitchenette in it and he even ate his meals there.

After that Maurice put himself out to be darling to me. Maurice was always a weaker character than Ferdie. Ferdie was sinuous, pantherlike. Maurice was blond, as muscled as Ferdie, but the muscles seemed unused. He was, oddly, like a gorgeous wax replica of a gorgeous male model. Actually handsomer than Ferdie—so handsome that if one didn't spend too much time at it, it was a stark and startling pleasure simply to look at him.

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But only to look. The boy was cold all the way through.

Willie was fonder of Ferdie than of Maurice. Ferdie was mean, but he wasn't cold. Maurice was a thing of beauty to be displayed like one of the antiques, paintings, or carvings. But there was raw emotion, a kind of flame, in Ferdie. He was dark gold, with large and lambent eyes. He carried a jungle in him.

Perhaps that was why it seemed so natural when Ferdie bought the lion cub. One morning Willie looked out the window of the breakfast room, into the patio. He took a deep breath. Then he smiled. "Come here, darling," he said to me. "Look what that Ferdie has done."

Ye gods, what? I thought. Set fire to my bedroom? Dug a pit for me to fall into? I went to the window and saw the cub sniffing at the plants. It was an adorable creature. Big, slappy feet, its head round and furry and innocent-eyed. I love animals. Perhaps better than people. Even if they are vicious there's an honesty about them. Especially I love cats, so graceful, so self-sufficient. But working all the time as I did before I married Willie, I had gotten out of the habit of wishing I had one.

Impulsively I slid back the glass doors, went into the patio, and touched the cub's head. It was purring, so loud the purr sounded like a growl. It rubbed against my negligee that was trimmed with eider. The cub caught a mouthful of eider and made funny faces as the feathers tickled his nose. I laughed, kneeled, and put my arms around its neck. Ah, the lovely pure thing! It was the loveliest thing in all that house of beauty.

Willie stood over me, his eyebrows peaked, his expression admiring. "Well," he said. "You *are* a constant surprise. Ferdie, aren't you pleased that my wife loves your new pet?"

Ferdie was standing beside the doorway to the garden guesthouse, a leash in his hand. Glowering. He forced a smile and slanted his eyes so their expression couldn't be read. "They make a charming picture," he said tightly. "But I had hoped to have the lion solely attached to me. The animal trainers advised that it should be taught to recognize only one person as its master."

I stood up, staggering a bit as I always do because of my weak leg. Without a word I went in the house, back to my breakfast. It was difficult to swallow the coffee. For I knew exactly what Ferdie had in mind. Train that cub. Then

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when it grew up, one day, the end of me. How he'd bring it off I didn't know. Perhaps toss a steak on me. Or grapple me when Willie was away and then toss me to the lion.

Willie joined me. "Darling," he said, "how good Ferdie really is at heart. He has given the cub to you because you were so beautiful together. He said that now he would never be happy owning it just for himself—it was so apparent the cub instinctively loved you."

"I don't want Ferdie's cub."

"It isn't Ferdie's cub," Willie said sleekly. "Ferdie doesn't want it any more. If you don't accept it I'll have to send it back to the animal people."

As I mentioned, Willie is very intelligent. He wanted me in his household. Alive. Impulsively I went to Willie and kissed his cheek. Then I hurried back to the patio and my cub. When we were through playing my robe was stripped of feathers and the cub had a pink cider mustache.

I had dreamed many times of the gorgeous cats I might own some day—Persians, Siamese, Burmese. But never of a lion. That was for Hailie Selassie, an emperor. Or for a lion tamer. Now I owned one, and with my surroundings I felt royal. The cub, even so young, had strength and a dignified confidence. The way it padded around me, rubbing against me, with a soft show of muscles beneath its loose baby skin, was thrilling. Along with the bold and lovely way it looked into my eyes. All that spring we played, the cub and I. Willie hired an animal trainer to give me pointers, for the cub was growing and becoming rougher in play.

Willie began to spend a great deal of time in the patio with us. Not Ferdie, who sulked in the guesthouse. And certainly not Maurice, who had let out a terrified squeak like an oversized mouse at his first sight of the cub and then had fled to the roof above the pool area for his interminable sunbaths. Even in that safe place he shuddered and chittered to himself as he watched us play below.

Willie's reason for staying in the patio was not because he was worried about the cub attacking me. If that had been all, he would have hired a guard. He stayed because he was fascinated. By the pair of us. Sometimes he looked at me as though he had never seen me before. And sometimes, to tell the truth, I looked at myself in the mirror as though I had never seen me before. The reflection was of a woman who should have a lion for a pet. Tawny-haired as the cub.

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Sinuous in line when standing still, when not walking and showing the limp. A woman that the beauty in that house had rubbed off on.

Willie took up sketching that summer. He had a gift for it. An amateur's gift, yet with true feeling coupled with delicacy of line. He liked to catch the cub and me in motion. He grew better and better at it and his trips to New York, or wherever he went, became quite rare. He had always kissed me on the forehead when we said good night and I went to my room. Now he began kissing my lips. One night when a tear trickled down my cheek he kissed it away. Willie no longer gave me the creeps.

One cloudy morning in early fall, as I stepped out of my bedroom onto the shallow brick step leading to the patio, I tripped and fell over something. My knees struck the bricks and for a minute I closed my eyes and rocked back and forth, easing the pain. Then I looked to see what had tripped me. It was the cub's bloody head.

Yes. Hacked off. My beautiful cat. My darling, soft, purring, playing love. My pure strong lion.

I just sat there. I never wanted to get up. It was too late to help the cub. And who wanted to get up and move and live where hate crouched on the edge of peace and beauty?

Willie found me like that. He helped me into the house and made me take something—some pill, I didn't even know or care what it was. It wasn't long until I began to fade away into sleep. And as I did I thought I heard, far away, someone crying.

When I woke, the cub was gone. Ferdie too. Maurice, of course, wouldn't have come near enough to the cub to kill it. Willie and I never discussed it. But he began to pay even more attention to me than he had before.

Even though no blame fell on Maurice, Willie ignored him. Maurice often looked like a lost soul—no Ferdie to talk to or fight with—and he kept wandering from his room into the pool, then up to the roof for his sunbaths. And always smiling and fawning at the dinner table, like a nasty child that people can't bear to pick up and cuddle.

Willie was taking me a great many places. Not like before, which had been only to big events where everyone would see us. But suddenly now to dinner in some special little restaurant where we knew no one. Or on his New York trips where he made me do a lot of shopping. He insisted one time in New York on buying me a

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leopard coat. "You don't know yourself, Courtney," he said. "I do. I'm a connoisseur. You need leopard."

Whoever would have thought that Courtney Aikins, born in southern Indiana, once crippled with polio, who had spent most of her life as a mediocre salesclerk, could look as if the leopard coat had grown out of her. But it did. My gray eyes seemed to turn green and slant catlike as I looked in the long mirror. And my skin from being in the sun so much was tawny gold to match my hair. How the saleswoman oohed and aahed, while Willie looked sleek and proud, not unlike a cat himself.

Willie finally relented about Ferdie. One morning there Ferdie was, calling from the door of the garden guesthouse to Maurice who was lying face down on the roof taking his sunbath. Maurice raised up and answered with something sharp —I couldn't make out the words. Ferdie shouted back and Maurice flipped over and dangled his golden legs over the side of the roof as though he would jump into the patio. Willie went out and they both became silent.

After that, every time Ferdie and Maurice spent more than five minutes in each other's company, they had a spat. And from the tense expression on Maurice's face, and the jerky nervous way in which he talked and laughed, it was clear that he was as uptight as I was about Ferdie's return.

One day as Willie and I started out the driveway, headed for lunch at the beach club, I discovered I had forgotten my purse and gloves. While Willie waited, I went back to my room for them.

Ferdie and Maurice were at it again, out in the pool, just beyond my partially opened door. Their voices were high and shrill. It was the servants' day off, and as far as the boys knew, the house was empty. Ferdie accused Maurice of killing the cub. In a rage Maurice admitted it, saying he had poisoned the beast first, then got the idea about cutting off its head. "Something they would be sure only you would think of!" he shrieked. "You—jealous because she took away your lion! And if you couldn't kill her, like you tried, you'd kill her pet! And that's what they did think. Go ahead and tell on me! They'll never believe you. They'll believe you're making more trouble and you'll get run off again!"

I slipped out.

I could have—maybe I should have—gone right out and told Willie. But that would have left me with Ferdie. Probably

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for keeps. No doubt Willie would be terribly remorseful and do everything he could to make it up to Ferdie. So I didn't say anything.

That morning, the day of the murder, Maurice and Ferdie chanced to come into the pool area at the same time and saw me swimming. Ferdie turned on his heel and left. Then I heard the bang of the guesthouse door. Maurice smiled, feathered a kiss toward me, and walked up the stairs to the roof. He knew I didn't like anyone else in the pool when I used it.

I never told anyone, not even Willie, that I saw Ferdie go up to the roof. And come back down again. Because I didn't see him. Of course, anyone would know that it would be easy not to see. For I went into the steamroom after swimming. It was a habit of mine. The steam helped my leg. I was still there when I heard screams from the patio. I grabbed my robe and hurried out. There was Maurice, his head smashed against the bricks, the golden face trickled with blood.

The screams were coming from Ferdie, standing over Maurice.

"Have you done it again?" I asked. "Like you killed my cub. Like you tried to kill me!"

He sprang at me, grabbed my throat, shook me, screaming, "You lie, you lie! I never killed the cub! Maurice killed the cub! You did it, you pushed him off the roof! You'd like both of us dead!"

Which is what he wished, for Maurice and me.

I was half unconscious by the time the gardener came, the cook jabbering behind him. I could scarcely move my neck for a week.

Willie was in New York at the time. So it had to be me, when I could talk, who called the police. Then I walked over to the sobbing Ferdie and slapped his face. Hard. "You listen to me," I said. "You're the only one with the strength to pitch Maurice over the edge. I couldn't shove him an inch. The servants had no reason to do it. And you know how I am about stairs, how I avoid stairs. And you hated Maurice. Almost as much as you hate me."

"I didn't, I didn't! I was in my room, listening to my stereo."

"Perhaps," I said. "Between times. I have other ideas. But in this case we have to think of Willie. Accusations and counter-accusations such as we might make in this household will give a poor picture of Willie to the world. I'll phone Willie and have him hurry home. Until then I advise you to say simply that you found Maurice in the

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patio. And I will say just what happened, that your screams brought me out of the steamroom. It's your problem to think up some explanation for why you choked me."

Willie flew right home. Terribly shaken. Shocked by Maurice's death, and perhaps even more shocked at the thought of any scandal.

Ferdie and I, of course, had to make statements to the police before Willie arrived. So did the gardener and the cook, and the gardener told about having to pull Ferdie off my throat. Ferdie cried and said how sorry he was, that the sight of his friend's dead body had so shaken him that he must have been temporarily out of his senses.

"He's a very highstrung boy," I said. "And he had just come for a visit with Maurice after not seeing him for a long time. It was a shock. Poor Maurice, perhaps he fell asleep, then turned in his sleep because the sun was getting strong, and simply rolled off. The roof should have a railing."

That was certainly the way it looked. Although, as I said, I had my own ideas.

The reporters attempted to make something out of Maurice's relationship to our family. "He was like a son," I said. "Mr. McKinley is a wealthy man and has endowed several schools. In addition he has educated quite a few young people on an individual basis."

After that the newspapers referred to Mr. McKinley's lovely, dignified wife whose "face was pale and set with grief" over the tragic accident.

Willie gave Ferdie a peaked-brow, probing look when he arrived from New York. And they had a private discussion. Ferdie apparently didn't tell him that Maurice had killed the cub, possibly for fear Willie would begin to tie in revenge with Maurice's death. I thought of telling, but then Willie might want to know why I didn't exonerate Ferdie earlier. It might solidify Ferdie's position.

For after all I couldn't prove that Ferdie returned to the pool that morning while I was in the steamroom, then slipped up the stairs and pushed Maurice over the edge.

It was chilling to have Ferdie back in the house. Yes, once more in his old room. Eating dinner with us every night. Now when Willie was away and the servants not nearby, I moved around like a cat who has suddenly been brought into a house full of dogs.

"Why don't you ever wear your leopard coat? You look so beautiful in it," Willie said one night when we were about to

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take another trip to New York. It was winter and snowing up north.

"The cleaners did a bad job on it. It looks queer, some of the hair doesn't come up, it's matted and uneven. And it's shedding."

"I'll complain to the furrier," Willie said. "After all, they're the best in New York, they should make good. It cost enough."

"It was probably the cleaner's fault."

"Then the cleaner should make good. People like that oughtn't to be in business."

"All right, Willie," I said. "I'll talk to them. In the meantime I have the tweed and it's fur-lined."

"You're not the tweed type," he said fussily. "We must get you another coat."

But we were so busy doing other things that we didn't get around to it that trip. Later he asked about the leopard coat, but casually because by then we were planning a trip to Tahiti and fur coats seemed silly.

Some woman in some thrift store certainly found a bargain. Oh, sure, the fur would be matted down here and there. But a little more cleaning in the right spots would put it right. It was just that the coat had stayed too long in the steamroom. I forgot to take it out until after I had gone to my room and dressed. Then when I did get it, I tucked it inside my robe and put it far back in my closet, still wet and steamy. Anyway, I never wanted to see it again. So it dried queer in spots.

The morning Maurice died, Ferdie was in the guesthouse. I heard his stereo playing, and it was in his bedroom on the side away from the patio. The music was loud. Ferdie always played the music so loud when Willie was away that it kept me from concentrating on any music I might want to hear.

I went to my room and got the leopard coat. Then I draped it over one of those silly inflated seahorses we had in the pool, the kind one floats around on. It was difficult for me not to stumble, going up the stairs with that clumsy thing in my arms. My bad leg was trembling, because this was the second time I had gone up those stairs. Just a few minutes before, I had dried off my feet and climbed to the roof. I had seen Maurice lying on his stomach, cheek on his hands, elbows thrust out. He was facing away from the stairs, breathing slowly and deeply. His foot gave an involuntary twitch, as happens when one is asleep.

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So then I went down for the leopard coat and the seahorse. And came back, quietly, quietly. I knelt down so I couldn't be seen from the patio and thrust the leopard-covered seahorse against Maurice, hard and quick. He woke up, whirled his head to see what it was. His eyes sprung wide, terrified. He must have thought it was another cub, a leopard cub. He let out a choked yip and rolled to get away from it.

"Why, it's only a joke, Maurice," I said. "I was only playing."

I said it as he pitched over the edge. If he had survived that fall I would have said again, "It was only a joke, I was only playing."

Willie has invited Ferdie to go with us to Tahiti. Ferdie hates me. I hate Ferdie. I wonder which one of us will be the first to do something about it? I wonder . . .

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It is a long time since we brought you a "reading of the will" story, complete with the usual shrewd and watchful lawyer, the usual wily and perceptive testator, and the usual expectant and undeserving heirs. Everything usual, you ask? Well, not quite . . .

WHERE THERE'S A WILL

by PAUL THIELEN

THE HEIRS OF WARREN Wilcox, three men and one woman, were seated in chairs grouped in a semicircle in the office of attorney Jason Grant. Well-dressed, attractive, assured people in affluent middle age, the heirs spoke in polite but guarded tones, making idle conversation. It was a pose, Grant knew, a device to mask their deeper interest in what the will of their grandfather would reveal.

The answers to their questions were being assembled at that very moment in an adjoining office by Miss Mildred Russell, a slight, thin-faced, rather mousy woman of 41 uneventful years, who was arranging the documents that comprised a folder titled *Warren Wilcox—Last Will and Testament.*

Miss Russell, whose resignation had been duly tendered and reluctantly accepted, had only three more days to work for Grant, Osborne, McElhenny and Williamson. She was a highly efficient legal secretary, a truth that everyone involved in the operations of the firm these past two decades would confirm. By virtue of commendable thrift and her sagacity in capitalizing on a favorable financial opportunity, Miss Russell's desperate dream had reached fruition. All her bridges were burned. Soon she would inject a measure of glamor into her quiescent spinsterhood by starting a new life on the enchanted island of Majorca. Prim, reserved, and virtuous, Miss Russell nonetheless frequently indulged in wild fantasies, but of these and other indiscretions her associates were, of course, unaware.

She took the last sheet from the typewriter and glanced through the papers in the file. Although her thoughts, under-

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standably enough, strayed to the sands of that fabled Balearic isle, she rose and with the professional detachment born of long years in her secretarial position, knocked twice on the door of Jason Grant's office, then entered quietly.

The occupants looked up with vague interest as she handed the file to Grant. She did not speak, and gave them only a perfunctory glance which in no way revealed whatever sentiments she might harbor. Grant nodded his thanks and Miss Russell turned and left the room, closing the door behind her.

Outside, the waning afternoon sky was leaden on this seventh day since Wilcox, at 93, had been laid to his eternal rest. A stray solitary leaf, swept by an improbable current of rising air, sought sanctuary on the fourteenth-floor window sill. The breeze teased it briefly, then whisked it away to soar aimlessly over the city.

Grant's office was supposedly the most important, as befit his rank in the esteemed law firm that he had founded and headed for the past half century. Yet it had none of the sleek and shiny décor of the other offices in the enterprise which occupied an entire floor of the building. Its only deference to modern-day appointments was the telephone with a row of colored buttons, and the wall-to-wall carpeting. His ancient roll-top desk, its character augmented by a collection of cigar burns assembled throughout the years, suggested an earlier era. One entire wall displayed Grant's multitude of volumes on the law. On the other walls hung a collection of sporting prints and a diploma yellowed with age.

In contrast to this rather somber setting, a bright and exotic horticultural specimen—an East Indian herb known to botanists as the *acalyphahispida*, and to laymen as the chenille tree—rested in a pot in solitary majesty in one corner of the room. Red velvety tassels drooped from graceful stems and broad green leaves diverged from the branches. Not yet fully grown, it stood four feet high, and despite its nobility was not particularly appealing to those of unbotanical inclinations. It was misplaced in these surroundings and obviously unappreciated by the heirs; but, ironically, it represented the triumphal achievement of Wilcox's waning years.

Grant cleared his throat. At once the conversation stopped. "We're all here, I see," he announced, aware that it was a needless declaration of a fact

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obvious to all. His eyes moved from person to person, seeking to predict their reactions to Wilcox's last will and testament. He smiled thinly, armed with the foreknowledge of what his deceased client and friend of almost 60 years had stipulated.

All eyes were on him, Grant knew, and he decided with perverse pleasure to prolong the drama. He made a convincing picture in center stage. Tall, slat-thin, with a prominent nose and a fringe of white hair ringing his shiny scalp, he looked somewhat like a wise and aged stork. His clothes hung loosely on his spare frame. From a silver case in his pocket he extracted a cigar, and his hand shook only slightly as he lit it.

Satisfied now that he had achieved his purpose, he cleared his throat again. "As you all know, I prepared your grandfather's will according to his wishes. This has been almost my entire contribution to this firm of late." He chuckled tolerantly. "My youthful colleagues conspire to shelter me from more exhausting business affairs."

He blew a puff of smoke that hovered over the group like a cloud. "Before we get to the actual will and in accordance with your grandfather's expressed wish, I have been instructed to read a letter he has addressed to you. It is not part of the document itself, which of course will be filed in the courthouse and ultimately become a matter of public record available to any curious citizen. For reasons that will soon become apparent, he wished to keep the letter's contents entirely within the family."

The grandchildren of Warren Wilcox sat and waited. Like polite vultures, Grant thought. He speculated on how different the scene might have been had not their parents been killed in an airplane crash 15 years before. The generation between Wilcox and the surviving members of his family had not been an easy one to bridge, and it had embittered the old man to suspect that not one of them felt any genuine affection for him.

Grant opened the folder. "And now if there are no objections," he said, "let us get on with your grandfather's letter." His voice held a sad note as he began to read:

" 'My dear grandchildren: I write this conscious that my days on earth are rapidly nearing their inevitable conclusion. My body, already having served me longer than any man has a right to expect, is operating like an engine on

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reserve power, soon to sputter to a stop; but I pride myself, rather vainly, that my mind still functions normally, however well that may be.

" 'For some years now I have envisioned this day. I have considered you at great length, the children of my only child, Ellen, whom I had never expected to precede me in death. As you will discover, I have not been without sources of information about your activities. I have pondered your traits and foibles, and have been disappointed. Honesty compels me to stress that in this old man's judgment you have demonstrated far more weakness than strength. Forgive me if my opinions are unjust.

" 'To each of you I have something to say. You, Frederick, the oldest, will be nearing fifty when this is read, according to my best estimate. You are a highly successful man. Or are you? This, of course, depends upon one's yardstick. Your business is thriving. Your home is most impressive as I have noted on my rare visits. You are a member of the proper clubs and a pillar of your church. Despite all this, or perhaps because of it, I consider you a fraud. You have attained your ambition of amassing wealth, but I suspect that it has been at the cost of deeper things. Possibly, something like Faust, you have sold your soul.' " Grant paused and flicked the ashes off his cigar.

Frederick Madden, a large and important man accustomed to command, squirmed self-consciously in his chair. A red flush crept up the back of his neck. He opened his mouth as though to protest, then thought better of it. He stared grimly ahead and said nothing.

Grant coughed discreetly and continued: " 'There is nothing reprehensible in becoming wealthy, Frederick, but it appears to me that you have made it far too important. It has brought you several dangerous enemies whom I fear will one day settle accounts with you, and a neurotic wife who would have been happier in a cottage. Your ambitions have fostered a colossal greed. I have always had the distinct impression that your questions about my finances were a thinly disguised attempt to ascertain how much of an estate you would share. I suspect, too, that you have made investigations entirely apart from your cautious inquiries of me, but of course I cannot be certain.' "

The old lawyer turned a page and resumed: " 'To Charles, my second grandson, I direct these observations. Quite unlike your brother, you have made a career

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of dissipation and irresponsibility. You have no legitimate occupation that I am aware of. I have long known about your escapades, your affairs with females, and your multitude of debts. This role of playboy fits you admirably, for there is no denying your charm. Unfortunately, as your two ex-wives have discovered, there is little of substance behind it.' "

Charles Madden, two years younger than Frederick, grinned as he met Grant's gaze. If he felt chagrined he gave no evidence of it. Instead he laughed good-naturedly, as though acknowledging a modest tribute. The hair combed down over his forehead, the elegance of his sideburns and the modish cut of his clothes, could have been a travesty in another man his age; but Charles Madden carried it off quite well. Even the crisscrossed wrinkle lines in his face—lines that had no connection with the passage of time—added to his attractiveness.

"The old boy had me pegged, all right," he said easily. "I only hope he's made the right provisions to take care of those debts he's talking about." He looked around, apparently seeking an admission of similar sentiment from the others. No one else spoke.

" 'You, Charles,' " Grant finally went on, " 'of all my grandchildren have displayed the most benevolence, yet I wonder how much of this is counterfeit, a pretense to delude the victims you always seem to find. Your foolish schemes have bordered on lunacy and your amorous adventures are more typical of some Oriental potentate with a string of concubines. How you have escaped prison, or death at the hands of an irate husband, seems miraculous.' "

Grant paused to indicate a pitcher on the table. "Water, anyone?" There was no reply. Deliberately he poured a glass for himself, took a sip, then turned again to the folder on the desk.

The letter continued: " 'My granddaughter, Jessica, has become a handsome and intelligent woman. You, Jessica, have married well, but like Frederick you have developed a questionable set of values. According to the numerous newspaper items I have read, you are a "clubwoman and social leader," no less. You spend your time on one noble cause or another, but indicate small concern for your primary duty as a mother. Or is this another ancient concept I have outlived?' "

Jessica Ford, smartly groomed, indignantly pressed her cigarette into an ashtray.

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Her normally cool eyes blazed with resentment. "Why, of all things. How could he!"

Grant continued to read: " 'I have looked for signs of the little girl you once were, but regretfully I have not found them. I have looked for warmth and humility in your children, my great-grandchildren, with the same result. Instead I find overbearing, overprivileged upstarts who "demonstrate" in the streets. This is a fact of modern society that causes me few regrets on leaving it. You, Jessica, as in the case of Frederick, have paid too high a price.' "

Grant turned another page and all eyes shifted to the remaining brother. Dr. Wayne Madden, physician and surgeon, youngest of Warren Wilcox's grandchildren, looked at Grant with the same air of pleasant assurance that he regularly adopted with his patients.

" 'Wayne, ' " the attorney continued reading, " 'you, too, have attained commendable success. You are a renowned member of the medical profession, but you also suffer from adherence to false values. You are a competent, possibly even a brilliant practitioner, from all I have learned. But too much of your attention has been directed to your profits on the stock market and election to office in various medical organizations. This, to the detriment of your excellence as a healer.

" 'I hesitate to expose the following, but I am confident of the discretion of our family. I must regretfully remind you that inattention to your profession has already cost a life. Yes, I am aware of the case of Mrs. Masongill. The details do not really matter now, but I know that your examination was hasty and incomplete, that a malignancy which might have been arrested was undetected and allowed to grow. As a result, Mrs. Masongill died needlessly or too soon. The incident was suppressed, of course, but I managed to learn of it. I do not intend to chastise you for a tragic mistake, but I would have expected some indication of remorse, some sign of rededication that would prevent another Mrs. Masongill. There has been none. Despite all the promise you displayed, somewhere along the line you exchanged it for other considerations.' "

Dr. Wayne Madden, ashen-faced, stared unbelievingly through his glasses. His perplexed look seemed to ask: How did the old man find out? Who else knows? He was conscious of his family watching him with a new and morbid interest.

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Grant, having no wish to subject Wayne to further discomfiture, continued reading: " 'And so, my grandchildren, I end this critique. I hope you will believe that I have pointed out these things not from malice but from love. It is my deep wish that even at this late hour each of you re-evaluate your goal in life—if you can find it in yourself to concede that such is necessary.

" 'I turn now to what will interest you the most—the division of the spoils. I suppose you will be distressed at the modest size, but I must remind you that the cost of care at the nursing home in which I have spent this last decade has not been inconsequential. As a result, your inheritance will be rather smaller than you expected. As my attorney and long-time friend, Jason Grant, will explain, and as my will states, I have nothing to leave you except some foolish personal possessions, a bank account which after funeral expenses and payment of outstanding bills we have estimated will contain about $20,000, and my chenille tree.

" 'I know this last has been a source of much amusement to you, and that you have regarded my attention to, even affection for, this plant as evidence of the instability of a senile old man. Perhaps this is true. Yet, as you know, I had no sons to perpetuate the family name, and even the business enterprise I organized many years before your birth has long since lost its identity. Call it an old man's vanity, but it seems important that something representative of Warren Wilcox, if only a worthless botanical specimen, live after me.

" 'I have specified that when my assets are computed, except for a few special bequests, my estate be divided into four parts, each of you thus to share equally. I further hope that there will be sufficient regard for my wishes to induce one or more of you to take my chenille tree and care for it. This seems little to ask. It requires only a small amount of organic food and regular watering.

" 'Should none of you wish to keep and care for the tree it will go, at Jason Grant's direction, to the Horticultural Society. It would be my hope that all of you might wish to retain and share it, if for no other reason than to demonstrate some affection for a foolish old man with whom you shared only limited rapport. If not all, I hope at least one of you will take it.

" 'I have nothing else to tell

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you, my grandchildren, except that I have loved you. Whether any of you ever reciprocated this sentiment, or considered me an anything other than a cantankerous old nuisance, I have no way of knowing. May God bless you.' "

Warren Wilcox's heirs sat silent as Grant concluded. Jessica, expressionless, examined the hem of her dress, a garment first shown in stark and expensive simplicity in the pages of *Vogue*. Charles moved restlessly in his chair and Wayne still looked distressed. The first to speak was Frederick.

"A total estate of twenty thousand. Ridiculous!" he shouted angrily. He pointed an accusing finger at Grant. "Who's been handling grandfather's holdings, you? I know there's got to be more than that. Why, it was just a half year ago I checked—"

"Into what he had," Grant finished drily. "He was right, wasn't he? He thought you'd try to find out."

"Yes, I did," Frederick said, his voice rising again. "And you can be sure you haven't heard the end of this."

The old lawyer smiled. "Go ahead, and good hunting." He put down the letter, then moved it aside. "But meanwhile there's still another matter. Which of you wants to care for the chenille tree? You, Frederick, seem to be the most vocal. Do you want it?"

"Certainly not," Frederick snapped. "Give it to the Horticultural Society. None of us wants it."

"Let me remind you that your grandfather's desire was that it remain in the family," said Grant. He studied them. "Surely one of you will indulge an old man's last wish."

Jessica pushed a wisp of hair beneath her hat. "I couldn't possibly. After all, he's—well, he's dead. What difference can it make to him now?" She looked uncertainly at Grant.

"Well, that leaves the two of you," he said, addressing Charles and Wayne. "Could you be prevailed upon?"

Wayne, as though in a catatonic state, shook his head mutely. Charles looked at each of his brothers and ceremoniously raised his hand. "I volunteer, sir. I'll take it. You know me, anything for a laugh."

The others looked at him in open-mouthed disbelief. Jessica brightened, her relief obvious. Wayne managed to speak for the first time since Grant began to read the letter. "That's good, Charlie, as long as he wanted one of us to keep it."

The scorn on Frederick's face was unmistakable. "You're

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crazy, Charlie. I mean, crazy. There's no accounting for what goes through that silly brain of yours." He laughed derisively. "By God, I never thought I'd see the day when you'd want something that wasn't in skirts. Or preferably, without them."

Jessica frowned disapprovingly at Frederick, then turned a patronizing smile on Charles. "It's best that you have it, dear. It's only fair that you get more than the rest of us." She glanced at the chenille tree and gave an involuntary shudder.

The reading of the actual will was anticlimactic now. Grant's voice droned on, repeating in formal legal language the provisions that Wilcox had previously covered in his letter. These included such special bequests as "my pair of dueling pistols" to Frederick, "my set of Shakespeare" to Wayne, "my pocket watch" to Charles and "her grandmother's emerald brooch" to Jessica. At the end of the list was "my chenille tree in its pot and all its contents, its plant food, watering can, and pruning shears to whoever promises to accept and care for it." There was a blank space where the name of the recipient, or recipients, was to be entered.

Only a few minutes were required for the reading of the will. Grant concluded and there was a long silence. Then Jessica reached for her purse and stood up, and almost on signal the meeting was adjourned.

Grant watched the grandchildren of Warren Wilcox leave his office. Frederick still glowered suspiciously at him. Charles, the last to go, looked intently ahead as he clumsily carried the chenille tree in its ceramic pot out the door. Grant remained at his desk, pondering the scene over which he had just presided.

His reverie was broken by the appearance of Miss Russell. "So one of them took the tree," she said. "Charles, wasn't it? Was he the one you expected to take it?"

"I didn't know," said Grant. "Actually I would have bet that no one would."

She picked up the folder from the desk. "Do you want me to file this?" she asked. "I don't suppose you'll be referring to it any more."

Grant smiled. "I think I will. I'll be hearing from Charles one of these days. If not, I'll have to get in touch with him. And then we'll probably have to defend the validity of the will in court—unless I've misjudged Frederick."

"I don't understand," Miss Russell said. "The language is definite. The intent of the testator is perfectly clear."

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"Four words, Mildred—'and all its contents.' "

"Oh?" the woman said politely.

"Maybe you'll recall the wording of the provision about the chenille tree. Whoever took it got the tree in its pot 'and all its contents.' Those four words are significant."

Miss Russell patiently awaited further explanation.

"Didn't you guess?" Grant chuckled. "You handled most of the details, even directed the withdrawal of funds from Warren's bank account. And, of course, you transcribed all my notes."

"Yes, but—"

"Warren Wilcox left a special bequest to one of them," Grant went on. "To the one who would prove his love, or at least a reasonable facsimile. Included in the 'contents' is the bulk of his estate—an oilskin pouch buried in the dirt of the pot containing the chenille tree. Inside the pouch are eighty-six one-thousand-dollar bills."

An expression of surprise altered the usually imperturbable and undistinguished features of Miss Russell, and Grant watched her with amusement. "Now you know why we'll probably be needing this file." He drew a watch from the pocket of his vest and glanced at it. "Why don't you leave, Mildred? It's past closing time."

Miss Russell smiled faintly and obediently took her leave. She cleared her desk top and covered the typewriter. Taking her hat and coat from the rack in the employees' cloakroom she did not pause at the mirror to adjust her minimal veneer of makeup. Preoccupied with a more important matter, her head was filled with visions of Majorca's sun and sea and sky.

The elevator descended, tediously forever, to the ground floor. The sound of her heels echoed loudly as she crossed the deserted lobby and hurried out the doorway to the street. Her pace quickened, and now she was almost running through the early evening darkness. At the corner she turned toward a huge parking lot. She weaved in and out of the rows of cars.

Suddenly she recognized the car she sought and her excitement mounted. She was about to finalize a transaction with a partner as realistic as herself, who when she had approached him several weeks before, had instantly seen the merits of her proposition. Miss Russell moved over to a sleek late-model car where, in consideration of services rendered and information furnished, Charles Madden, somewhat reluctantly now, was about to share his legacy of $86,000.

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THE JURY BOX

by JOHN DICKSON CARR

Suppose, at the beginning of some given month, your friendly critic could call for just the sort of books he wants to read—and get 'em? This being a dream, what should I choose? The order, no doubt, would be for three classic, fairplay detective novels and one roaring spy-thriller constructed in much the same way.

Well, has it happened now?

No, not exactly; dreams fulfilled are as rare as miracles. However, since we have had very tolerable luck this year, at least I can offer you two detective stories that will test your wits, one mystery-adventure from a master hand, and one tale of espionage fulfilling every requirement.

In *The Sound of Murder*, by John and Emery Bonett (Walker, $4.95), we get a superior British item by a superior husband-and-wife team who play according to the rules.

One of those new, (relatively) tall buildings, now so dominant above London's skyline, houses the business empire of Millionaire Halberd Corsair, that man with many interests. When the tycoon falls to death from his penthouse flat, it becomes evident that somebody has chucked him out. Though no ogre, he has been very hard-headed; his money may well have attracted many of the wrong-headed, not to say the hard-hearted.

Across this luxurious stage move Corsair's uncertain wife, his pleasant nephew, his enigmatic sister, and his elderly brother-in-law, a retired colonel of skittish tastes. Backing up the official investigation of Superintendent Mallick, our true sleuth is visiting Inspector Borges, a Spaniard who speaks flawless English and seems flawlessly to understand British character. Throughout action complicated but never muddled, trails cross and interweave towards nowhere until, after explosive violence at Termini House, Inspector Borges compels the murderer to trap himself.

First published in '68, when they failed to send me a copy,

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"*30*" *Manhattan East*, by Hillary Waugh (Belmont, 95¢), provides a notable problem for the officers at Manhattan's Homicide North and in particular for Detective Frank Sessions: young, intelligent, all too human.

The cops can't believe Monica Glazzard, that influential gossip columnist, would have taken her own life; any reader, of course, will have discounted suicide at once. But, if she didn't die of barbiturates, how did she die and by whose hand?

Mr. Waugh has been praised justly for his credible characters and realistic background. He should receive praise equally high for sheer ingenuity and skill. I confess with pleasure that in this one the author defeated me; though I anticipated his fine double-twist solution, we had almost reached disclosure before I saw it.

The protagonist of Victor Canning's *The Great Affair* (Morrow, $6.95) is so sympathetic and engaging that we should follow him in fascination even apart from the sensational adventures of this chronicle. Formerly an Anglican clergyman, Charles Nelo Sangster has been unfrocked and jailed though he has acted from the best, most charitable motives.

Emerging from clink, he must first commit burglary to recover jewels which are his own property. Then, accompanied by shapely Sarah, he sets forth dangerously on yet another errand of charity. Humor, thrill, surprise animate their mystery-adventure odyssey towards war and riot in far places. *The Great Affair* is just that, with one of our best storytellers at the very top of his form.

If it's espionage you want, you can't go wrong with Edward S. Aarons' *Assignment—Tokyo* (Fawcett, 75¢), the newest paperback adventure of C.I.A. Agent Sam Durell. By mere accident some nation—Russia, Red China, perhaps America itself—has loosed deadly plague germs in a Japanese fishing village. One girl, Yoko Kamuru, survives but disappears. She must be found at once, so that medicine may discover some immunizing agent before plague grips the world.

Hounded by the K.G.B. on one side and by Peking's Black House on the other, Sam Durell pursues his quarry. How he succeeds, in fast action amid scenes of vividness and color, is not the least achievement either of the Cajun or of his creator. As always, highly recommended.

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nominated as one of the 5

BEST-OF-THE-YEAR

Shortly before the MWA (Mystery Writers of America) held their 25th Anniversary Dinner, on May 1, 1970, the Annual Awards short-story committee announced its nominations of the five best mystery short stories published during 1969. We were delighted, of course, that three of the five best stories of the year had appeared first in EQMM: Joe Gores's "Goodbye, Pops," Robert L. Fish's "Double Entry," and Christianna Brand's "Poison in the Cup." Joe Gores's story won the coveted Edgar as the best mystery short story of 1969—an honor it richly deserved.

The other two nominations were Duvan Polk's "A Promise of Oranges" (from "Good Housekeeping") and Robert McNear's "Death's Door" (from "Playboy"). We tried to obtain the reprint rights to the two stories not originally published in EQMM so that you would be able to read, or reread, all five nominations. Unfortunately, the story by Duvan Polk is not available, but fortunately, the story by Robert McNear (a steady contributor to EQMM, as you know) is available, and we now offer it to you—one of the most unusual mystery short stories published in 1969 or in any year . . . Now enter, if you dare, the Porte des Morts—Death's Door . . .

DEATH'S DOOR

by ROBERT McNEAR

I READ FROM THE OIL-company travel guide: "Blackrock is the northernmost community on the peninsula. Here you get the feeling of a true fishing center among the anchored fishing boats and nets reeled out to dry. Off Blackrock lies the Porte des Morts, a strait six miles wide separating mainland Wisconsin and Nicolet Island. In 1679, about 300

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Potawatomi Indians drowned in a sudden storm while crossing the water to engage the Winnebagos. The tragedy was witnessed by explorers La Salle and De Tonti, who named the strait Porte des Morts, or Death's Door. Today it is said the strait contains more shipwrecks per square mile than any other area in the Great Lakes."

I folded the travel guide and put it in the glove compartment. Sitting there in my car, on the last leg of my journey, my immediate impression was that the waters were a lure for the local Chamber of Commerce to attract visitors, a thrill for these station-wagon travelers at seeing so sinister a place, a pool for skindivers in which to explore old wrecks.

Porte des Morts: Death's Door. It seemed very commonplace this late afternoon: a desolate little landing deep in the snow, a weather-beaten smokehouse whose door moved open and shut with the wind, a timber dock where a veteran ferryboat—the R. L. Ostenson, Nicolet Island, Wisconsin—creaked patiently on its hawsers. Beyond that was the bleak strait—sky the color of worn steel and bay the same, hinged by the horizon line and identical except for the dark channel of water out through the ice.

I like forgotten, half-populated places, almost-deserted cubbyholes of the world. I suppose that's one of the reasons I stay on as a reporter for a small-town newspaper instead of going to Chicago and becoming a well-known journalist.

I'd been waiting in the car for about five minutes when the hunchbacked deckhand turned up. He came half skipping from the dock, thumb up, to motion me out of the car. I got out in the ankle-deep snow, saying, unnecessarily, "You'll take her on?" He swung into the driver's seat and slammed the door for an answer.

Great! I liked every bit of it. Only in some out-of-the-way place like this would you find a hunchbacked deckhand who—I had got a good look at him—had fine golden hair and an almost-perfect Botticelli face. He took the car carefully across the planking and onto the deck while I, bothered by the usual curiosity, had to walk across the road to the smokehouse and look inside. No fire had burned there for months, but the ghost of smoke and fish possessed the place completely. It was so dark that I could see little except the small drift of snow that had come in through the door. Now, one of my itches is about doors—I can't

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stand to see them open when they should be shut, or idly swinging, like this one; so I closed it tight, for this winter, at least.

Then I took myself aboard the ferryboat, climbed the stairs, and came to the door of the passenger lounge. I'd felt almost alone until now, but there were about ten people sitting around, smoking, drinking coffee, waiting. It looked like a roadside diner, with plywood booths along the walls and a couple of scarred tables in the center. It looked stifling in there, so I turned away from the door and made my way along the railing to the pilothouse door.

Inside the pilothouse, leaning on the wheel and smoking a cigarette as he gazed at the car deck below, was a youngish, long-jawed man with pepper-and-salt hair, who, in spite of the ordinary windbreaker and dungarees he wore, was obviously the captain. On his head he had an old-fashioned officer's cap with a brass plate above the bill. It read: CAPTAIN. I watched him douse the cigarette, straighten up, and signal down to the hunchback on the deck. A floodlight went on down there.

The hunchback and a teen-age boy moved around quickly to cast off. The captain tugged twice at a cord on the compressed-air horn, bouncing two blasts off the snow-shrouded face of Blackrock. Then he pulled the engine telegraph to reverse and I could feel the deck plates vibrate as the ferry backed away from the wharf. The skin of ice crushed under the black-steel hull as we moved out to swing around slowly into the channel. *Bon voyage*, R. L. Ostenson.

In those few minutes the pale daylight had gone completely; and now, looking out across the strait, I saw an early moon laying a yellow path almost directly alongside the channel through the ice of the Porte des Morts. At the end of the double line I could see the low fishback of Nicolet Island. "Strange place, the island," Ed Kinney had said back in Green Bay. "Isolated, ingrown, maybe two hundred people, fifty families. Swedes, Icelanders, Germans. They don't warm much to strangers. Lots of superstition."

Kinney has been a feature editor for a long time and he can't help talking like that. Still, he used to summer on the island and I didn't doubt the truth of what he said. "Trouble is," he'd added, "there's nothing to be superstitious about. In winter the island's about as exciting as the lobby

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of the Northland Hotel at two o'clock of a Sunday morning. You'll see 'em all come out of hibernation for that basketball game. Then they go back into it for the rest of the winter."

Blackrock had slowly receded into the distance and the last lonely peninsula pine had faded astern. I realized that the sharp wind had got through my overcoat and that I was beginning to shiver. Just then the wheelhouse door opened and the nasal voice of the captain said, "So softhearted I can't stand to see even a damn fool freeze to death. C'mon in, friend."

I stepped inside. "Thanks, Captain. It was like the fresh and gentle breeze of May. You are speaking to a man who has covered the Green Bay Packers Sunday in and Sunday out for four winters."

"Hey, a reporter!" he said, smiling. We shook hands. "I'm Axel Ostenson. Now, why d'you figure Vince Lombardi had to go and retire? Those boys ain't been the same since."

"Even the iron men wear out in time," I said. At this point the radio squawked and he went over to say something into a microphone about position and time of arrival. I looked around.

All was neat and newly painted—up front near the window, the wheel and the engine telegraph, the captain's high stool. A padded bench ran the length of the pilothouse. Framed on the walls were some Great Lakes shipping charts, a safety-inspection certificate, and a plaque informing me that the Sturgeon Bay Shipbuilding Company had created this noble vessel. Ostenson finished with the radio.

"You remember Ed Kinney?" I asked. "He's my editor on the *News* down in Green Bay."

"Sure do. Used to have a summer place on the island. I taught his boy Gene how to sail."

"Ed thought I ought to cover the Door County championship game this year. First one on Nicolet Island since 1947. Ed thought there might be a good feature story in it, along with the play-by-play. I thought maybe you could help me, so I thought I'd ask you a few questions—"

"Nuremberg, Germany," he said.

"What's that?"

"Missed it. I was in Nuremberg, Germany, with the Tenth Division in 1947."

"But you must have heard a lot of talk since about—"

"I'm sorry, mister, but you know the Great Lakes maritime regulations say that I'm not

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supposed to have anybody who don't belong in the pilothouse. I'm gonna have to ask you to go along to the lounge. You get yourself a Coke or a cuppa coffee." He didn't look at me, but kept staring straight ahead as I went out.

Queer how suddenly the Great Lakes maritime regulations got enforced.

I moved along the rail to about midship. The wind was like a cold blade on my face, but I wanted to give myself just a few more minutes before I had to go into the stuffy, smoke-filled saloon where I knew that, in spite of myself, I'd drink at least three or four cups of bad coffee to pass the time. So I'd cut the taste of that with something better. I groped in the inside pocket of my overcoat and found the oblong shape of my flask. The bourbon built a comfortable small fire in my throat and my innards.

I stared down at the black edge of water alongside the hull and the thick shelf of ice. In the moonlight the strait was one vast skating rink. Every now and then a chunky little berg came scraping along the hull as we passed. I wondered what might happen if the R. L. Ostenson didn't go back and forth from Blackrock to the island twice a day. How long would it take before the channel froze over solid? But, I supposed, even at that, the island could hardly be cut off. With this kind of freeze, the iceboats—those craft with runners and sails or a motor—could make it back and forth without the slightest trouble.

Speak of the Devil, I thought. It was just about then that I heard the motor. I took another sip and peered ahead into the dark. Funny that somebody would be running one of those things this time of evening. There was more spray now than there had been and it stung my forehead and fogged my glasses. There seemed to be an area of low-lying mist on the ice ahead.

I took my glasses off and gave them a good wipe with my handkerchief. The motor noise got no louder; it was still a low chugga-chugga-chugga, like something I remembered out of my boyhood. I leaned over the rail and strained my eyes toward the sound. I saw one red eye in the gray cotton fog.

Then, gradually, as we overtook it, the thing took shape just at the far reach of glimmer from our deck lights. No iceboat, but a black, sign-bedecked Model-A Ford, bumping along at maybe ten or fifteen miles an hour. Running boards, spare tire on the rear,

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dim yellow headlights on the ice. It looked just like the one my dad used to own back when. Only Dad would never have let anybody violate the glossy black finish with signs like, HOLD ME TIGHT, BABY and BEAT FISH CREEK and THERE AIN'T NO FLIES ON THE N.I.S. Bent backward in the wind was a radio aerial from which flew a green pennant that read in block letters, NICOLET ISLAND.

I leaned as far over the rail as I could and, as the old car came abreast of me and then gradually began to drop astern, I tried to make out the faces of the kids inside. It was too dark for much more than silhouettes. However, I did raise my arm and wave to them. And I swear that I saw somebody waving back from the rear seat. Then the yellow headlight beams grew dimmer, the chugga-chugga dropped back out of earshot, and we'd lost them.

Funny, I thought. I'd hate to have any kids of mine out on the ice on a freezing night like this one. But I supposed that people up here had different ideas. They probably drove over to Blackrock—when the ice was thick enough—as casually as we'd go down to the drug store in Green Bay.

Anyway, it was an interesting little incident, probably not the usual thing to the average Wisconsin newspaper reader. I thought I'd pin it down a little more and use it somewhere in the feature. "Up around Nicolet Island, some strange things are taken as a matter of course," my lead might go. "As I was crossing over on the ferryboat last night, I saw . . ."

I made my way along the railing until I'd come back to the pilothouse door. Ostenson was still at the wheel, as if he hadn't moved since I'd left. I went on in. He glanced at me.

"Captain, I guess you saw those kids out on the ice in the old car back there just a bit. Heading over to the island. Is that a fairly common thing up here? Couldn't the kids get into trouble?"

He didn't reply. He swung his whole head around toward me, his face perfectly immobile and his gray fish-scale eyes staring. Then he looked back at his course and was silent for nearly a minute.

At last he said quietly, "It happens." Then, in a louder voice, he commanded, "Come here!" I walked over. "Open your mouth and breathe out," he said. He waited a moment. Then he said, "Liquor drinking on this ship is against the law. I could file a complaint against you and get you fined. You hear that?"

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"Come off it, Cap," I said. "It's just a drop to keep the old blood flowing."

"Maybe," he said in a cold voice. "But I could testify that you barged into my pilothouse and I had to order you out. Then you spent some time drinking liquor somewhere. Then you came back into the pilothouse against my orders. Mister, this may be just a dinky little Great Lakes ferryboat, but the captain is still the law on it. Now, you go back and sit down in the passenger cabin and shut up."

I made my disconsolate way back to the cabin. What in the world had gone wrong with that moron in the pilothouse? He'd seemed perfectly friendly until . . . I couldn't figure out what came after the "until." I sat down at one of the tables in the middle of the cabin. A burly man with a blond mustache and wearing a thick mackinaw looked up from across the table. He pointed at a half-full bottle of rye whiskey and a paper cup. "Drink?" he asked.

I looked around. Just about every table had a pint or a fifth on it. Obviously, not a temperance ship. Just when I was going to ask mackinaw-mustache about the captain, I decided better. If Kinney's two paragraphs were any guide to the island, this chap was probably the captain's older brother, or at least a first cousin. Probably just Ostenson's quirk; he must have suddenly decided that he didn't like my face.

I was on deck again to observe our landing. The dark form of the island was very close now and I could see lights farther up the channel. They seemed to outline the dock. We passed a channel buoy frozen in the ice at a drunken tilt and wearing a snowy beard.

The wind swept in from the lake, even harsher and stronger than before, then calmed a little as we came in. The engine went half speed, then silent, and came on loud again in reverse. I saw the wooden pilings of the dock, illuminated by a hanging string of yellow bulbs. I heard a shoe scrape on the stairway behind me and I turned.

It was the hunchback, just starting down to the deck. "I seen 'em, too," he said in a low voice.

"The kids in the car?" I said. "Yeah, what about it?"

"It's the old team," he whispered. "It's the old team still tryin' to make it." He was suddenly scuttling down the stairs to his duty with the ropes.

Clannish, inbred—but Ed Kinney had forgotten to tell me that I might run into some

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slightly loony ones, too.

Comfortable, warm, old-fashioned, and presumably by the side of the lake, Lakeside Cottages struck me as a good omen. I was the only guest, yet a neat path had been shoveled from the lodge down to my small cabin (Number Nine) and a boy named Roger Nelson carried my bags. He turned the lights on and showed me where the radio was.

"Are you visiting up here?" he asked. "I wouldn't want to be nosey, but we almost never get an overnight guest in the winter."

"No. I'm a reporter. I came up a day early, but I'm really here to cover the big game tomorrow night."

"That's great," he said, smiling. "You from *Life*?"

"No, just from Green Bay, I'm afraid." He handed me my key.

"I'm one of the assistant basketball managers," he said. "Means I carry stuff around a lot—though you'd never guess it from the important-sounding title."

"I won't tell a single soul in Green Bay what you *really* do," I said. He started to leave. "Well, good luck against Fish Creek," I said.

He smiled and shook his head. "It's Ephraim," he said. "The game's against Ephraim. Fish Creek wasn't even in the running this year."

"Of course. How could I be so forgetful? Good luck against Ephraim," I said. He smiled again and closed the door behind him.

Sure, it was Ephraim Bay. We'd even had a feature story on Kevin O'Hara, their six-foot-six, high-scoring center. Why had I said Fish Creek? I lay on the bed with a couple of fingers of whiskey in the bathroom tumbler, blowing fancy smoke rings. Then it came back to me. Simple.

The kids crossing the ice in the old car had BEAT FISH CREEK painted on its side. The slogan was probably a leftover from the baseball or football season.

After a while I stirred myself and got the notebook from my jacket pocket. First I'd get something to eat, then I'd get in a little work on the background for the feature story. I found the page with my notes on the briefing Ed Kinney had given me. On the second page, with a star beside it, was the name "Edward Maier."

"Ed coach fr abt ten yrs Now retired. One of bes' small-school coaches in state Runner-up three, four years in row, then champion team around 1947. Small town wld

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abt basketball. Maybe 60 kids in the high school, 59 of 'em bb players. Tall Swedes. Local disaster sometime in 40's or 50's. School fire? Anyway, several children died, including team members. Quick check in our files draws blank, but ask Ed, who will know all abt it." There were several other entries, but I decided to try Maier first.

There were all of four pages in the phone book. Edward Maier's number was a quaint 32-B. Then I had to turn a crank on the phone to ring the operator. I was back in the 1920's. "Please give me 32-B," I said.

"There's somebody staying at Lakeside," I heard the operator say to somebody with her. "He's calling Ed Maier." Then I heard her say, "How should I know why he wants to talk to Ed?"

"Operator, honey," I said in my coziest voice. "My name is Charley Pope. I'm a sports reporter on *The Green Bay News.* I get a hundred and thirty dollars a week. I'm forty years old, six-foot-one, one hundred and eighty-five pounds, married, and the father of two. I'm here to cover the game tomorrow night. And now, operator honey, please ring Ed Maier for me."

"Well, it's nice meeting you, Mr. Pope!" she said. "We don't get many visitors in the wintertime." I heard a whispered aside to her friend, "Newspaperman, and he sounds real nice. No, I *don't* know why he's calling Ed Maier."

When she finally did get the call through, there was an answer almost immediately at the other end. It sounded like a hiccup.

"Is this Mr. Ed Maier? I'm up here to cover . . ." and I went on through my introduction. There was silence for almost a minute.

I knew that Ed Maier was still conscious, though, because I could hear a deep and regular breathing over the line. "Listen, Mr. Maier," I finally said, "if it's more convenient I can come over to see you tomorrow. But I'd rather make a short call this evening, if it's okay."

More deep breathing. Then he spoke one word in a hoarse voice. "*Hurry!*" And he hung up.

Thumbtacked to the wall of my cottage was a postcard-sized map of the island. I studied it until I thought I'd worked out my route from Lakeside to Town Line Road, where Maier lived. It was now almost seven. I'd talk with the old boy for about an hour and try to get back to get some dinner around eight. I went out to my car.

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The map was probably okay, but the snow and the scarcity of signs tricked me, because the next one I saw read GUNNAUGSSON ROAD, which was a dirt road that didn't appear on the map at all. I wandered from that onto another road that turned out to be Detroit Harbor Road. This did appear on the map, running the length of the island south to north. My only trouble was that I didn't know which way was north. After a couple of miles of rough going through the snow a red-neon savior gleamed out of the dark. God bless Gus' Bar. Eats, Beer, Mixed Drinks.

And there they both were, just as advertised. The one, massive old-fashioned dark wood; and the other, behind it—massive old-fashioned barkeep. A jukebox was sobbing at the top of its voice when I went in.

"Ed Maier?" said the bartender, shaking his head slowly, as if this were just too much. He mopped the bar for a while. "Ed Maier," he finally said reluctantly, "you mean *coach* Ed Maier?"

"Yes, I mean *coach* Ed Maier on Town Line Road. Can you tell me how to get there?"

"Guess I could," he said. He started to polish some glass beer steins. "What do you want with him?"

"I want to offer him a job in the movies," I said. "Now, where do I find him?"

"Well," said Gus reflectively, "when you go out the door, point yourself right. Go about twenty-five yards. Then go left on Town Line right down to the very end. That's where Coach lives."

As I was going out the door he said, "If you're a reporter on the Green Bay paper and you get a hundred and thirty dollars a week, how come you tell people you can get them in the movies?"

"How come you sell poisoned beer?" I asked and left.

But the directions were right, anyway. I found Maier's ramshackle little cottage in a winter-bare birch grove. There was a pile of firewood outside the front door, a little drift of smoke from the chimney, and a dim light inside the window. The door was opened even before I could get out of the car.

Ed Maier was one of those people who look about 30 from a distance of 20 yards. Blond hair combed straight back, very fair skin, athletic build, and no pot. At half the distance he had added ten years, maybe 15. He wore high boots, heavy pants, and a plaid windbreaker. You began to see the creases in his

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face, the jowls, the round-shouldered middle age in his stance.

When you got right up there to shake hands, you saw, by the lamplight in the doorway, the undertaker's next. Or at least that was the way he struck me at the moment. The blue eyes were glazed. The face was a Rand McNally of varicose veins. The flesh looked like puff paste. Ed Maier seemed to be the victim of one of those diseases that age a man too rapidly.

He invited me in and offered me coffee. He had two cups ready and one of those old conical coffeepots steaming on one of the hot flagstones of the hearth. On the littered table there was a plate with some thick slices of bread and cheese. I made myself a sandwich and sat across from him in a rocker near the fire. I meant to ask him why he'd said "Hurry!" that way, but I didn't quite know how to put it.

He began, "Well, you can quote me as saying we've had a great season. No, sir, I won't be coy about that. The boys have marvelous spirit and we've been getting near onto seventy percent of the rebounds. Thank Red Hockstader for that. Six-four and a natural for All-State. Best center I've ever coached."

"But, Coach," I said gently, "I never heard of Red Hockstader. The Nicolet Island center is a kid named Kris Holmsund."

"Think I don't know that?" said the old man. "I thought you said you wanted to talk about the championship team. That was 1947."

I would have sworn that the brew in his coffee cup came more from Kentucky than from Brazil. He took a long swig.

"They really had her fixed up," he said. "The old American Legion Hall. Flags, bunting, more smorgasbord than you ever seen in your life. Couple barrels of beer. Band all in new uniforms. Vee for victory. Big sign read, WELCOME TO OUR CHAMPS. Broke my heart." He drifted off into silence. "They were all my boys. Just like sons."

I wasn't getting anywhere. We were drifting pretty aimlessly in the old man's memory, though we seemed to be skirting the edge of that disaster—school fire or whatever it was—Kinney had told me to check on. I made a guess and tried again.

"So they never showed up at the American Legion Hall for the victory celebration? Is that the way it was, Coach? Remind me just how it happened, will you?"

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I poured myself some more coffee and made another cheese sandwich. The fire burned hot in the fireplace, but so many of the windowpanes were broken and patched with cardboard that I kept feeling an intermittent draft.

"My wife Julia was alive then. The whole thing broke her up terrible. And Sally run off to Milwaukee and married a bum. Drunken bum, I heard. Not that I've even thought of her for twenty years."

Now we were really lost in the fog. Might as well give it up for tonight, I thought—but I decided to try once more. "Coach, tell me how it all came about. What happened first that led up to . . .?"

He nodded. "Well, you know," he said patiently, as if repeating an oft-told tale. "You know we won by four points in the overtime. And when we got back to Blackrock, the ferryboat was late. No sign of her. And all the boys crazy mad to get back to the celebration. And me half out of my head myself, I guess . . .

"Well, anyhow, I said wait. Red said no. *He* was going to drive it alone. I said he was a damn fool. He said it wasn't snowing. I said it was going to any minute and though the ice was thick enough, still there were probably weak spots in it here and there. So I took him out back of the smokehouse, where the others couldn't hear, and I talked Red out of it. Thought so. Then I went down the road to a house to use the telephone. When I came back the whole damn team had left. It was beginning to snow then . . ."

I suddenly understood the old tragedy of Nicolet Island. The champions were all dead, the triumphant team wiped out. But, of course, it was a lot more than that. Everybody on the island was related to one or more of the seven or eight boys on the team. But something was bothering me and I had to explode.

"Why in God's name, then, do the people of this place still let their kids toot around on the ice in old cars? You'd think they'd learn something from what happened. Why, just tonight, coming over, I saw another bunch in a car, chugging along across the strait."

As the old coach stared at me, the merciful potion from his coffee cup began to take hold. The lids seemed to fall over his eyes like the lids of dolls' eyes, pulled down by gravity. His head slowly sank to his forearm and he was silent.

"Coach?" I said experimentally. He didn't move. I

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debated whether to haul him off to his bed, but then I guessed that he probably spent a good many winter nights in the old easy chair in front of the dying fire—and the ancient phrase was a perfect literal description—in his cups.

I got into bed early and opened my book. I'd brought along Alan Moorehead's *The White Nile*, which I'd been saving to read and which now seemed to me a good, faraway kind of thing to dissipate all the nonsense I'd encountered that afternoon. Because now, in a quiet moment, it seemed to me that the whole business was nonsensical. And by the time I got sleepy enough to turn out the light, I'd succeeded. I was deep in Tanganyika with Livingstone.

I was shaving the next morning when I heard a knock at the cabin door. "Come in," I yelled, and Roger Nelson pushed open the door. Hearty good mornings on both sides. I was feeling refreshed and hungry. "How are the pancakes up there at the lodge?" I asked.

"Great," he said. "But you've got an invitation to breakfast—out. Mr. Ostenson sent me down to ask you."

"Him?" I said to the mirror. "On the ferry on the way over he took an intense dislike to my looks. Just about threw me in irons. What does he want now?"

"Oh, Axel," Roger said. "He was probably just in a bad mood because he was dying for a drink. Gets that way late in the afternoon. No, this is Nels Ostenson. He's the mayor here. Businessman. Rents out cottages and deals in real estate. He's a very nice guy, you'll see. I think he probably wants to make friends with the press. And you couldn't get better pancakes than they make at the Ostensons."

"Seduced!" I said. "Be out in a minute."

Roger showed me the way. The sun was so brilliant that it almost hurt; and under the bright sky, Nicolet Island looked as I'd hoped it would—the little street, snow-covered fields, sedate stone fences, and plain white farmhouses off in the distance. The snow squeaked under our boots.

"Did you ever meet Paul Hornung? What's Willie Davis like in person? Boy, and that Bart Starr! Did you interview him after that game with the Cowboys? How many counts does he take in the pocket when he sees his primary receiver is covered?" Roger kept asking me questions faster than I could answer them. We'd

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covered a fair amount of the Packer offensive game by the time we got to a frame office building with a sign reading, N. OSTENSON, BUILDERS, REAL ESTATE, PLUMBING & HEATING. Down the side of this, there was a cleared cement walk, between hedges, that led to a pleasant white clapboard house.

Nels Ostenson was a big gray-haired man with a Kris Kringle face and a ringing laugh. I liked him immediately. "By damn," he said, one hand on my shoulder, "my favorite author in person. I even read your tragedies—such as 'Colts Nose Out Packers Twenty-Four to Twenty.' But we won't talk about that. I'm sure everybody you meet talks Packers until you're sick of it."

He showed me into a pleasant room, where the sun shone through the front windows and bookcases lined the walls. A table with a white tablecloth was set up and almost as soon as we sat down, a teen-age girl brought in some orange juice. ("Daughter Karen, Mr. Pope.")

And the pancakes were good—big and light and golden. After a decent pause to make a serious start on them he said, "I'm going to apologize all over the place, Charley. I think you had a bad introduction to our little town out here, and I'm sorry. Wish I'd known you were coming. First of all, Axel was nasty to you on the ferryboat, I understand. Well, you've got to know Axel to know why. He's a good boy, but he's kind of on edge these days—family trouble. Wife had an operation last summer and she's never really recovered. One kid just about in college and lots of money worries. So I think you ought to forgive him for blowing his stack. He didn't know who you were. I guess he got into one of his moods."

Nels said all this with a sort of grandfatherly grin and some wide waves of his fork. He had a snowy-white napkin tucked in his shirt collar, under his chin.

"I'd already forgotten. I shouldn't have gone poking around the pilothouse, anyway."

"Good! Good! Now that's settled," he said. "Too bad you had to run onto two of our worst pieces of hard luck just when you arrived. I'm sorry about Ed Maier. I should say straight off that poor Ed is in terrible shape. You know, one of the things about a little community like ours is that we probably make a big mistake by being too charitable. Now, some other place Ed would have been put in a home long ago. But folks around here just

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can't stand the idea of shutting a man up if he's harmless—even if it would be for his own good. Ed's been more or less off his rocker ever since his wife died.

"Trouble is, everybody who knew Ed in the old days loves him. Why, he was practically the local hero for nearly ten years. Nobody kinder than Ed; nobody better at handling the kids. And in a basketball-crazy place like this, somebody who puts out winning teams year after year just about owns the town. Sure, nowadays, he holes up in that shack of his, has the d.t.s, is full of crazy persecution delusions—but still it seems like nobody has the heart to commit him. Probably my responsibility, but I'm just as weak-kneed as all the rest."

"I gathered something like that," I said. "He gave me a disconnected story about his daughter running away . . ."

"And about the team?" Nels asked. He paused for a minute, looking directly at me.

"Something about the old championship team he coached, yes."

Nels sighed. "It's his worst bugaboo. He had a real crack-up back about Forty-seven, just after we won the championship. Pardon me if you've heard all this—but you have to understand something about that freak accident to understand what happened to him. You'll hear some crazy superstitious stories, but the truth is that we had one of those terrible, foolish accidents that winter and a lot of stupid rumors got started.

"What really happened is this. The team was coming back one night from the championship game at Fish Creek. Bad weather, and Ed knew it was going to be worse. They got to Blackrock and the ferry was late coming over for them. We had a kid on the team at that time, Red Hockstader—great player but a big headstrong German kid. At Blackrock he talked the rest of the team into driving over the ice in his old car. You know, cross the strait and surprise everybody by sailing into the welcome party on their own wheels.

"Now, Ed did his damnedest to talk them out of it—and he thought he had. But he didn't figure on Red's being so stubborn. So when Ed went up the road for a few minutes, the kids set out. Ordinarily it might be quite possible to drive right across the strait, if you did it in daylight and watched out sharp for rotten spots in the ice. It's different at night.

"Well, the sad story is that they must have hit a rotten spot and the whole team went right down to the bottom of the

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strait. Not a trace." He stared out of the window for a minute. "Anything else people say is pure baloney."

I hesitated. Finally I said, "I believe you. But there is one thing that bothers me."

He put down his fork and untucked his napkin. "What's that?"

"Well, since I've been here I've heard some of these rumors and one of them is pretty weird. People say that once in a while somebody sees an old Ford out on the ice, trying to make it across to Nicolet Island. Wrapped in mist, chugging along. All that. The old team trying to get home."

Nels threw his napkin on the floor and stood up. "Those damn kids!" he said. "Those damn jokers. I'll have the law on them one of these days, even if I have to get Madison to send the state police up!" His face was red and he kicked at a doorstop as he walked up and down.

"Charley, I don't know what's got into this generation. You know about sick jokes and black humor and all. I suppose most of that's harmless, but it does turn my stomach. Anyway, it's awful ghoulish when a practical joke is played on people who've really had members of their family killed or drowned, don't you think? So there's this bunch of smart-aleck kids in Blackrock who thought it was funny to buy an old car somewhere, paint it up with signs like the ones on Hockstader's old jalopy, and give the ferry passengers a scare on dark nights by chugging out onto the ice and letting themselves be seen."

"Do you know who they are?" I asked. "Can't you catch them?"

"I will some day," he said. "Just wait. I had the whole of Blackrock searched last time but they must have had the thing hidden pretty carefully. Not a soul in the vicinity lets on that he knows a thing. But we'll catch them!

"Cruelest thing is that old Ed really believes that car is out there. He swears that he hears it chugging along the shore by his house. Used to be he thought that only when he was drunk. Now he believes it all the time."

Before I left, Nels had calmed down a little and we talked about other subjects. Inevitably we got onto the Packers and I had to give him my personal impressions of Vince Lombardi.

Silence. Free Throw. The Nicolet Island guard leaned forward. Up on the toes, leaning more, then the calcu-

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lated throw, a graceful arc, and the ball dropped through the basket, leaving in its wake a dancing net, a howling gym. Before the referee could place the ball back in action, the timekeeper sounded the buzzer. End of the third quarter. Score: Nicolet Island 51, Ephraim 51.

Ed Kinney thought the island's population to be approximately 200, and my educated crowd-estimate placed the local rooters at nearly that number. Most had arrived early, well before gametime, and had invaded the gray-wooden bleachers, leaving cramped space for the half-hundred Ephraim fans who had crossed over on the midafternoon ferry.

Captain Axel Ostenson was there. So was Nels. I scanned the faces. Roger, carrying a bucket, gave me a big wave. Only Ed Maier was missing.

I'd spent the day poking around the island, picking up bits of local lore and tramping over some snow-covered but attractive landscape. My ideas for a feature story with just a touch of the supernatural as a come-on had to be junked (OLD LEGEND OF A LOST TEAM STILL HAUNTS NICOLET ISLAND). Everybody had heard the tale, of course, and everybody had then said, "Poor Ed Maier," alcoholism was a terrible thing, and one of these days poor old Ed would probably have to be put away in an institution.

Only one thing stuck in the back of my mind and bothered me. When I'd seen Ed, he'd been garrulous and probably drunk. He'd rambled on about lots of things he seemed to want to get off his mind. But he'd never mentioned the "ghost-car" story . . .

The timekeeper's buzzer announced the fourth quarter. Both sides scored repeatedly, though the game remained close. Then, with two minutes remaining, the Ephraim center, six-foot-five and full of aggression, committed his fifth personal foul and was returned to the bench, giving the Nicolet Island five both home-court advantage and control of the boards. The game ended in thunderous glory. Nicolet Island 71, Ephraim Bay 68. Door County champions again.

At that exact moment the whole population of the island went slambang out of their Scandinavian heads with one great, hoarse, endless yell of victory. Now I know what the berserk Vikings must have sounded like. The siren on top of the volunteer firehouse began to blast the air. I made it down to the locker room holding my ears.

They were still yelling up

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there as I tried to interview a totally incoherent coach Ostberg and a bunch of soaking-wet lunatic kids. Never mind. I've been in this business a long time and I've got a whole notebook full of the clichés. "It was a team effort. I never could have done it without the whole team in there fighting all the way. A great bunch of boys," etc. I keep wishing somebody would say something different one day.

The American Legion Hall had just about all the red, white, and blue you could possibly put in without going blind. From the rafters was hung a huge sign—obviously put into place that afternoon—NICOLET ISLAND BASKETBALL TEAM, DOOR COUNTY CHAMPS. The island's German band, in splendid befrogged blue uniforms, boomed out victory marches. The ladies of the American Legion Auxiliary doled out mugs of—not the watery punch you might expect but a hot, spicy, and potent *glogg*. The smorgasbord was delicious. Every kid in town was dancing.

Scenes of great hilarity and joy in which I don't share and large amounts of *glogg*, which I cherish but which affects me like a lullaby, sooner or later drive me homeward. I came out into the bitter cold of the parking lot to the strains—for the tenth time—of *Hail to the Victors Valiant*, and hoped my car would start without any fuss.

It took a little effort, but at last the engine turned over. Suddenly I heard a noise, a sort of choking cough, from the back seat. I turned around. Huddled there, passed out apparently, was old Ed Maier. He'd come to hear the sound of victory, it seemed, but he just couldn't force himself to go inside. Lucky I'd come out early, or he'd probably have frozen to death.

So I drove him to his house. I hauled him out and dragged him into the house—he was stiff in more ways than one, but he was still breathing and seemed in no danger. I put him to bed on the studio couch in his front room and coaxed his fire into a blaze. Under the old Army blanket he breathed hoarsely. I guessed he was safe enough, but he'd have quite a headache in about 24 hours when he woke up.

I switched off the lamp and went to the door. Just as I got it halfway open, I heard Ed Maier's voice loud and clear in the darkness, "*Now hear the truth, by God.*"

"Ed?" I said. "Are you all right? It's Charley Pope." I eased the door shut.

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He seemed not to have heard me. He started to speak again in that clear, deliberate, unslurred voice, not like a drunk but like a man dictating a statement.

"Witness before God. Last night, before we went to Fish Creek, I made Sally tell me the story. Knocked up; at first I thought, well, hell, it does happen and this isn't the first shotgun match on the island. And then something funny about her and the way she was acting and crying and refusing to name the boy; and I guess I did slap her around a little, first time in her life since she was a small kid and had a spanking. But Julia's hysterical down there and I guess I'm strung tight because of the big game, and so I did hit her. And so she did tell, did tell, did tell. Horrible dirty thing; how could they do it? In Holmgren's barn, Sally and the whole team, the whole damn team, my boys, and I thought of them all as my boys, every one of them there with Sally, and she didn't care.

"And awful hard for me not to let on I knew. At Blackrock, by the smokehouse, Red didn't specially want to try the trip; they'd been joking about it and some said what a big sensation it'd be; but Red, no, he wasn't foolish. Was only after I gave him a big drink from my hip flask and called the whole bunch cowards. Cowards, cowards. 'You guys can beat Fish Creek, but you're scared to get out on the ice; I drove it myself a dozen times, once in a snowstorm. Cowards.'

"No, they weren't. When I got back, they'd gone . . ."

I waited for a long time. "Ed?" I asked. "You awake?" He was beginning to snore. He was out cold, as drunk as I'd ever seen a man, but the strange thing was that I believed every word of his story.

I woke the next morning to a semiblizzard. It wasn't a really serious, driving Wisconsin storm; it was more like a boy blizzard having a snowball fight. It howled as if laughing and threw snow on the town. Momentarily it would clear and there would be a faint haze of sunshine overhead; then it would rush in as if to smother us with a heavy blast of new snow. At those times it made a kind of snow twilight. It was like that when I drove up to the landing—so dark that the lights of the R. L. Ostenson were shining.

Axel met me as I came on board. He had been waiting especially for my arrival, and he shook my hand. "Please feel welcome to ride either in the pilothouse or in the lounge, Mr. Pope," he said. "But *please*

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don't stay out on the deck in this gusty weather. The deck is slippery and you could have a bad fall."

"I won't bother you, Axel," I said. "I appreciate your invitation, but I think I'll just hole up in the cabin and read my book this trip."

We smiled and he slapped me on the shoulder, then turned to go along the deck.

The hunchback drove my car aboard—that made only the third one. There seemed to be no more than half a dozen passengers this time. I settled down in an empty booth in the lounge and tried to translate my mind to the shores of Lake Victoria and the upper reaches of the White Nile.

Successfully, too. When I next looked up I realized that the engines were throbbing and that we had been under way for some minutes. I put down the book and walked over to look out the window.

The snow and wind were still playing their fitful games—nothing but whiteness all around us for one minute, then a sudden clear period when you could see the dark channel and maybe even 100 yards or so out across the expanse of ice. I stood there, lost in a kind of meditation, for some time.

Chugga-chugga-chugga. I couldn't believe it. I opened the door and went out onto the deck. Not near, not far, stubbornly paralleling our course somewhere out there on the ice.

I was suddenly furious. Nels was absolutely right. It was the most senseless, ghoulish, idiotic practical joke in the world. Those high-school kids from Blackrock ought to be caught, have their car confiscated, be thrown in jail—even get a good whipping. Not only were they harassing the Nicolet Islanders in this stupid way but they were risking their own lives every time—look what had happened once before.

I went down to the car deck, full of this kind of resentment, hoping to get a glimpse of the old jalopy. Apparently nobody else had heard the sound, because I was all alone in the wind. I leaned over the rail and peered forward into the white confusion. The chugga-chugga seemed just a few yards away.

Then, suddenly, the breeze dropped, there was a clearing in the storm, and I saw it. I saw every detail. The old car was painted black, but the body had a lot of rust on it. One running board sagged. The left-rear fender had been crumpled. A light trail of snow streamed off the layer of white on top of the roof. The battered old license plate was, sure enough, WIS-

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CONSIN, 1947. But it wasn't any of this that made me jump off the ferryboat.

I still don't know quite how I did it. I remember taking hold of a rope and swinging over the side. It was probably lucky for me that no more than a yard or so of black channel showed between the boat's side and the ice shelf, and I swung across easily.

A puff of snowy wind came up again and the car was only a dim form ahead of me. I ran. I seemed to hear some kind of shout from behind me, from the boat, but nothing was going to stop me now.

Ten yards, fifteen yards; I thought I'd never catch up. It was hard running, because the ice gave good footing one second and none at all the next.

When the snow suddenly cleared I saw that the old Ford had stopped. They were waiting for me, heads in stocking caps poked out of the windows, faces of the boys grinning with mischief. The driver's red hair poked out from beneath his cap. They loved my startled reaction.

Ed Maier's body lay at the end of a ten-foot rope that had been tied to the rear axle. The rope was under his armpits, not around his neck, but I knew that he was dead, anyway. His face was partly covered with ice dust, partly bloody scrapes, but I knew him. I do not think that there was the least bit of astonishment in his expression.

I didn't hear the ferryboat's engine stop. The first thing I knew was that the hunchback was scrambling across the ice, yelling at me. It was he who had seen me jump overboard.

When he came up to me, he found me standing all alone, staring into the snowfall that was now coming down thick and steady over the wide desolate ice expanse of the Porte des Morts.

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Sometimes "the best laid schemes o' mice and men / Gang aft a-gley"; and sometimes the most innocent situation can turn into a catastrophe . . .

WHERE THERE'S SMOKE

by E. E. ROBERTS

WHEN YOU CAME right down to it, none of it would have happened if I hadn't taken Judy Day with me on the trip to San Francisco. Even under the best of circumstances a young unmarried girl traveling with an executive pushing forty was bound to raise eyebrows. And in a company as strait-laced as ours, raised eyebrows were definitely something you wanted to avoid, because you knew they'd be around to haunt you for years.

Needless to say, my wife wasn't too happy about the prospect either.

Nevertheless, Judy had done most of the paper work on the automated claims-control system, and since the purpose of the trip was to set up a pilot project to test out the system before putting it in all our branch offices, it was either take Judy or run the risk of overlooking some minor detail that would invalidate the whole installation and delay the system by another six months or so.

Under those circumstances I decided to take Judy, raised eyebrows or no. And even my wife bowed to the necessity.

"All right," she said with mock severity as I left for the airport, "but there'd better not be any lipstick stains on your collars when you come back."

I laughed, although I knew that there was more than a trace of real concern behind the joke. Betty's parents had become divorced because of her father's infidelity while she was still a teen-ager, and it had left Betty particularly sensitive and vulnerable.

"There won't be," I promised.

If I'd been alone, of course, I'd have had my usual quiet dinner at a restaurant within walking distance of the hotel and spent the rest of the evening reading or watching

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TV. But Judy wanted to check out North Beach and out of some vague feeling that she shouldn't go there unescorted, I went along.

North Beach wasn't what it used to be before the tourists discovered it, but there were still a few swinging places left and Judy with her young modern's unerring instinct soon ferreted one out. It was a small place, somewhat off the beaten track, with a freer and easier air than you usually found in most night clubs. For the life of me I can't remember its name—something odd and pointless, like most places these days.

In any case it wasn't long before Judy had been swept up into a group of people her own age. And after a while she gave up even the pretense of returning to our small table between dances. She did leave her coat and purse there, though. But finally she came over to pick up even these.

"Uh," she said, standing beside the table with her coat over her arm, "a group of us are going out for some pizza and then take in a midnight movie. Flash Gordon." She paused and wet her lips. "If you'd like to come along—"

She so obviously didn't want me tagging along that I had to smile.

"I don't think so, Judy," I said. I moved my hand in the general direction of my glass. "I'll just finish my drink and then head back to the hotel."

Judy beamed. "Fine," she said. Then she remembered her manners and put on a sober face. "See you in the morning then, Mr. Eidman," she said.

"Sure, Judy," I nodded, picking up my glass.

I watched her bounce over to her newfound friends and leave the place with them. Flash Gordon, I mused, shaking my head. I wondered what Judy would have thought if I'd told her I'd seen it when it was first run.

"It looks like you just lost your girl," a feminine voice said at my side.

Startled, I turned and looked up. A tall dark-haired girl with almost classically beautiful features stood beside the table, smiling down at me. She held a highball glass loosely in her left hand and now as I watched she raised it to her lips and sipped from it.

"Not really," I said.

The tall girl's eyebrows lifted. It was hard to tell in the dim light, but I put her in her mid or late twenties—a few years older than Judy at most. But there was a generation's difference between them in poise.

"She's not coming back,"

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the tall girl said flatly.

"I know," I said. "What I meant was that she isn't my girl. She just happens to work for me."

The tall girl pursed her lips. "I see," she said. She sat down opposite me with an easy grace that made it seem the most natural thing in the world.

"I'm Francie," she said. "I heard the girl call you Mr. Eidman, but that's much too formal."

"John," I said.

"Pleased to meet you, John." Francie fished a pack of cigarettes from her purse, selected one with due deliberation and held it up between her forefinger and index finger. "Light?" she said, looking at me quizzically.

There was a box of matches fixed to the ashtray between us on the table. I shrugged mentally, struck a match, and held it out for her. As she leaned forward to touch the tip of her cigarette to the flame, she let her fingertips rest lightly on the back of my hand.

She left them there for a long moment. Then she brought her glance up to mine, straightened, and blew out the match.

"What kind of work do you do, John," she said, "that you get to take your young girl employees out in the evening?"

"I work for an insurance company," I said, which was true enough. "And I don't ordinarily take my young girl employees out. This is a special occasion."

"I'm sure it is," Francie said. She looked down and toyed with her glass. "It still can be."

Even without the performance that had preceded it there could be no mistaking what she meant. And nine out of ten men would have considered me a fool or worse for turning her down—or at least would have proclaimed me such in a locker-room bull session. But I suspect that for one reason or another most would have reacted the same way I did.

I shook my head. "I'm sorry, Francie," I said. "The offer's tempting, but I have a wife and family back in Phoenix."

Francie looked up, genuinely surprised. "What's that got to do with it?" she said. "I've got a husband over in Sausalito who'd kill me if he knew I was with another man. If you don't believe me I'll show you the scars he's given me for some minor infractions of his rules. But the point is, he's not going to find out—just as your wife would never have to find out." She shook her head. "And what they don't know," she added, "can't hurt us."

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I put my hands flat on the table and studied them closely, trying to think of some way to explain myself without sounding too much like a prig. God knows why I felt I had to justify myself to Francie, but I did. Afterward, of course, when it was too late, I realized that I'd have been much better off if I'd kept my mouth shut and let her think whatever she wanted to.

Finally I said, "Let me put it this way. I love my wife and I'm not going to do anything or take any risk, however remote, that would mess up the good thing I have going with her." I could have added, but didn't, that it wasn't a question of Betty hurting me but of my not hurting her.

Francie looked at me thoughtfully. "Man," she said, "you're serious, aren't you?"

"Yes," I said, "I am." I stood up and put some money on the table to cover my bill. "Well," I said, "it's been nice meeting you, Francie."

"I wish I could say the same," Francie said.

I left her still sitting at the table. And that was that.

Or so I thought.

Until I got the phone call.

It came on a quiet Thursday evening six weeks later. Betty had taken our older boy over to his grandmother's and I was home babysitting with the two-year-old. I had finally got him settled in for the night and had just sat down with a book I'd been trying to read for over a month when the phone rang. I put the book aside and went to pick up the phone.

"John," a vaguely familiar feminine voice said, "this is Francie Bicknell."

"Who?" I said, honestly not remembering.

"Francie. From North Beach. Don't tell me you've forgotten already?"

I scratched my head with my free hand and frowned. I knew who she was now, but I didn't like her calling me. I especially didn't like her implication that there had been anything between us more than a short, casual encounter.

"Is there any reason I shouldn't have forgotten, Francie?" I said bluntly.

"Yes," Francie said, her voice hardening. "One. Right after you left, a kid with a camera sold me a picture he'd taken of us at the table. It cost me a bundle to get the negative. So I'll give you your choice: you can buy it from me or I send it to your wife."

It was almost a minute before I found my voice again. "You must be crazy," I whispered.

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"You think so?" Francie said. "Maybe you'd better see the picture before you make up your mind. I'll bring it right over and—"

"No," I said, too firmly and too hastily.

Francie chuckled. "All right," she said, "you come see me then. I'm at the Airport Motel. Room three-o-one."

I hesitated. It was an awkward situation no matter how you looked at it. Besides the embarrassment of explaining to Betty, there was the company's reaction to consider. Scandal had been known to wreck more than one career in our organization. It might be worth a couple of hundred dollars just to get rid of Francie with a minimum of fuss.

"How about it, John?" Francie insisted.

I glanced toward the room where my son was sleeping and made a quick decision. "I can't tonight," I said. "I'll meet you tomorrow."

"All right," Francie said. "But I'm catching the three o'clock plane back to San Francisco tomorrow. If you're not here in the morning, the picture goes in the mail to the Missus." And with that she hung up.

I put the receiver on its hook and went back and picked up my book. But I couldn't read.

Obviously I didn't say anything to Betty and the next morning I went to the office as usual. Then after an hour or so I made some excuse, left, and drove out to the Airport Motel.

I parked in the rear lot and entered by a door that permitted me to avoid the front desk. It was unlikely that anyone would recognize me, but why should I take chances when I didn't have to?

It was late in the game, but I was beginning to learn.

Francie, when she opened the door to my knock, was still in slippers and robe.

She grinned when she saw who it was. "Hi, John," she said. "Bet you never expected to see me again."

"No," I said drily, "I didn't." She held the door wide for me and I went into the room. "How did you locate me, Francie?"

She closed the door and locked it. "Simple," she said. "You mentioned Phoenix. So I just came here and looked you up in the phone book. There were three John Eidmans, so I just started calling until I hit the right one." She smirked at me. "Clever, huh?"

"Very," I said. "I'm just surprised you waited so long."

She shrugged. "I'd have been here sooner," she said, "but I had to wait until my husband

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was out of town again." She shook her head wryly. "He watches me like a hawk when he's home. You wouldn't believe the nasty, suspicious mind that man has." She paused and glanced at me slyly out of the corners of her eyes. "It would be awful if your wife started thinking that way about you."

"All right, Francie," I said. "Cut it short. How much?"

Francie grinned again. "You really ought to see the picture first," she said. "You can't fully appreciate just where I've got you until you've seen it." She went to her suitcase, took out a three-by-five photograph, and handed it to me.

"In case you're thinking of tearing that up," she said, "I have the negative in a safe place."

I gave her a hard look, then glanced at the photograph. It had been taken just as Francie had leaned forward to let me light her cigarette. Seen alone, with no knowledge of what had happened before or after, it looked like an undeniably intimate scene.

"Isn't that a beaut?" Francie said. "It couldn't have turned out better if it had been posed."

"Wasn't it?" I said bitterly.

"No," Francie said. "As a matter of fact, all I had in mind when I sat down was what I said I had in mind." She shrugged. "But that didn't pan out and when the kid came over with his camera it was just too good an opportunity for me to pass up."

I sighed heavily. "All right, Francie," I said. "I'll pay for your trip here and back to San Francisco and give you a couple of hundred extra for the picture and the negative."

Francie's lips curved into a contemptuous smile and she shook her head. "You can't buy your way out that cheaply, John," she said. "It's going to cost you a cool one thousand bucks to get off the hook."

I stared at her a long, long minute. Then I said, "Don't be too greedy, Francie. I'm willing to pay a reasonable amount to spare myself and my wife embarrassment. But you push me too far and I'll go to her and explain the whole sorry mess. And then your picture will be worthless, because she'll believe me."

Francie met my gaze evenly. "You really think she will?" she said. "What if I write something sexy across the back of the picture? Like, 'I'll never forget. Will you?'" Francie's smile deepened. "Will she believe you then? Or will she think that where there's smoke there has to be fire?"

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I didn't answer, because in my heart I was afraid Francie was right. If I had told Betty about the episode with Francie when I first came back from San Francisco, it would have been a different matter. But now, over a month later and under the threat of an incriminating photograph, the truth would sound weak and false while the lie would ring loud and true.

Oh, I had no doubt that Betty would *say* she believed me. She might even tell herself that she believed me. But deep down inside, a small canker of doubt would begin to grow and in the end it would poison everything between us.

I let my eyes drop. "It'll take me a couple of days to raise the money," I said.

Francie's smile turned triumphant. "You don't have a couple of days," she said. "I have to be back in San Francisco tonight. So unless I have the money by three o'clock today when my plane leaves, the picture goes in the mail."

I drew in a deep breath and then blew it out. "You win, Francie," I said. "I'll get the money and bring it back here before three."

Francie shook her head emphatically. "Uh-uh," she said. "You might have some fancy idea of knocking me in the head and taking the money back after I've given you the negative and picture. So the next time we meet it's got to be in a public place."

"Your husband isn't the only one with a suspicious mind, Francie," I said.

"Maybe so," Francie grinned. "But I'm not taking any chances. You meet me by the newsstand in the airport at two o'clock. Bring the money and I'll bring the negative and the print."

"All right, Francie," I said. "Have it your way."

She smiled contentedly. "I intend to." She unlocked and opened the door for me. "Don't be late," she said.

I left the motel and drove slowly back downtown. This was no simple awkward situation I'd got myself into. It was a morass and every move I made seemed to drag me down deeper. It had been a mistake, I realized now, not to have told Betty about Francie as soon as I came back from San Francisco, or at least right after I got the phone call last night. It might be an even bigger mistake to pay Francie's price. But having gone this far I could see no salvation except to go further.

I stopped off at the bank, signed the register, and ac-

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cepted the safety-deposit box the girl handed me.

In the privacy of a locked booth I counted through the savings bonds in the box. All told, they came to something over $10,000. I hated to touch them because we had set them aside specifically for the boys' education. But it was the only safe way. Any drop in our saving's account balance would be immediately obvious to Betty and require an explanation I couldn't give; but it could be years before she had occasion to notice that any bonds were missing. And with any luck I would have managed to replace them by then.

I counted out $1000 worth, slipped them into my inside breast pocket, put the rest back in the box, and closed it. Then I left the booth and gave the box to the girl to be returned to the vault. I waited for my key, then went over to one of the tellers whom Betty and I seldom used. She cashed the bonds without comment except to ask, "How do you want the money?"

I told her ten $100 bills and asked for a blank envelope to put them in.

Sharp on the stroke of 2:00 I walked up to the newsstand at the airport. Francie was already there, tapping one foot impatiently.

"You cut it pretty fine," she said irritably.

I shrugged. "I thought you would, too," I said. "I didn't think it would be wise to be seen loitering about."

"Hmph," she snorted. "Did you bring the money?"

I tapped my breast pocket. "Right here," I said. "Did you bring the negative and picture?"

"Of course," she said. She held out her hand, palm up. "Well?" she said.

I glanced around. "Here?"

Francie snorted impatiently again. "Of course here," she said. "Nobody's paying any attention to us—or knows what they're seeing if they are. If you want to draw attention, though, sneak off somewhere and see what happens then."

I hesitated and glanced around once again. It was true. No one was paying the slightest attention to us. More importantly, there was no one around with a camera.

Satisfied, I drew the envelope containing the $1000 from my pocket and held it in my hand. Francie reached for it eagerly, but I pulled it back.

"You too, Francie," I said.

Francie shrugged, opened her purse, and took out a small envelope. We exchanged envelopes simultaneously.

Francie slit hers with her forefinger and riffled through

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the bills swiftly. "Good enough," she said, stuffing the envelope in her purse.

Mine wasn't sealed and it contained a negative and a single print of the picture she'd shown me earlier.

I put the envelope in my pocket. "You know," I said thoughtfully, "I have the negative now, but you could have had another negative or other prints made."

"That's right," Francie said, "I could have." She closed her purse with a snap and walked off a few paces. Then she turned suddenly and smiled at me wickedly. "Be seeing you, John," she said. She turned once again before I could answer and then ran off to catch her plane.

I waited until she was out of earshot; then I said softly to no one in particular: "Perhaps not, Francie."

I got my car out of the parking lot and drove back downtown for the second time that day. It was still too early to go home without arousing Betty's curiosity, but I didn't return to the office. Instead, I stopped off at the public library and asked the librarian where the out-of-town telephone books were kept.

There were six Bicknells listed in the San Francisco directory and I copied the names and addresses down carefully. Then I went to a small photo-supply shop about two blocks from the library, where I'd never been before and would never go again. For a $5 bonus the owner made up five prints from Francie's negative while I waited.

On the back of each of the six pictures I wrote what Francie had proposed to send to my wife: "I'll never forget. Will you?" Then I put them in envelopes and mailed the six of them off.

Five of them would provide dinner-party conversation for five couples who would never know why they had received a photograph of two complete strangers in a night club. But the sixth would go to Francie's jealous husband.

I wondered how Francie would explain it to him. And whether he'd believe her. Or if he too would believe that where there's smoke there must also be fire.

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the first *CHARLIE CHAN* short story

a pastiche by *JON L. BREEN*

We try never to repeat ourselves in editorial comments, but this occasion calls for it—the first Charlie Chan short story, a pastiche respectfully written by Jon L. Breen . . .

*Earl Derr Biggers, the creator of Charlie Chan, wrote only six stories about his "patient, aphoristic Chinese-Hawaiian-American" sleuth. All six were full-length novels and all six appeared first as serials in "The Saturday Evening Post" (in those "good old days"). And from these six stories, by the miracle of Hollywood, have come more than 40 feature-length motion pictures, the Lord-knows-how-many radio shows, numerous commercial tie-ins, and, we are reliably informed, a forthcoming TV series. And not long ago Pyramid Publications issued all six novels in paperback—*CHARLIE CHAN CARRIES ON, THE BLACK CAMEL, BEHIND THAT CURTAIN, THE CHINESE PARROT, KEEPER OF THE KEYS, *and* THE HOUSE WITHOUT A KEY *(the last named was actually the first Charlie Chan novel, originally published in 1925—nearly fifty years ago!).*

Among current pastichists (pastichers?) (pasticciosos?), Jon L. Breen is the logical writer to bring us the "first Charlie Chan short story." You will remember that Mr. Breen has already given us pastiches of Ed McBain's 87th Precinct, "Frank Merriswell," S. S. Van Dine's Philo Vance, Ellery Queen's "L. Larry Cune," and John D. MacDonald's "Trygve McKee" (Travis McGee). And now he presents a short adventure of the one and only Charlie Chan—to help publishers and producers, readers and viewers, to perpetuate the alliterate (and literate) Charlie Chan as a "household name" . . .

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THE FORTUNE COOKIE

by JON L. BREEN

BILL ARTEMAS WATCHED the lights of San Francisco twinkle and recede in the distance. It was a clear night, and standing on the first-class deck of the S.S. Waikiki he could feel the brisk sea air on his face. Memories of his last night in the gleaming bay city now mingled with imagined delights of Honolulu, making his frame of mind happy when it could easily have been apprehensive.

Bill was young—23 on his last birthday—and being young he felt no qualms at all about the fact that he was virtually broke. He had spent the last of his inheritance booking passage on the Waikiki, and he knew no one and had no job waiting for him in Honolulu. But such things do not trouble the young, especially if they have Bill Artemas' range of accomplishments: a splendid tennis game, particularly strong on the forehand, a good background in English literature gained during four subsidized years at Stanford University, three months of valuable experience as a cub reporter on the San Francisco *Call*, and manners polished to a fine gloss by his acceptance in San Francisco high society, of which only Boston's is any higher.

Taking a deep breath of the clean night air, Bill wondered why he was alone on deck on such a lovely night, only a few minutes out of port. True, it was a bit chilly and less hardy souls might find it intolerably so, but being young—Bill suddenly realized he was no longer alone on the deck.

When Bill looked away from the fading lights of the bay city to see who had joined him, his first thought was that he need never look at lights or shimmering water again, only at this lovely face, heart-shaped and framed in dark brown hair. But he wasn't to look on her startling beauty for long. She grasped his hand, put something in it, and hurried away as quickly as she had come.

It gradually dawned on Bill that she had had terror in her eyes and that he now had a Chinese fortune cookie in his hand.

"And when I cracked it open, Mr. Chan, it was empty!"

It was early afternoon of the Waikiki's first day at sea, and

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Bill Artemas sat in the grandly appointed lounge opposite one of the ship's most illustrious passengers, a plump and middle-aged Chinese of self-effacing and friendly manner. Charlie Chan, of the Honolulu police, was on his way home from a law-enforcement conference in San Francisco. During his stay he had been the object of much gratifying yet faintly embarrassing personal publicity, so he was not surprised to find himself consulted by a fellow passenger for an off-duty investigation of a shipboard mystery.

"Mr. Chan," Bill went on excitedly, "I don't know who that girl is, but I'm sure she's in danger. Maybe she's being held prisoner or something. I—"

Bill broke off sharply as a steward approached.

"May I get you gentlemen something to drink?" asked the steward. "Some coffee or tea—or something stronger?"

Bill Artemas was cheered by the suggestion. "Scotch and soda. It's good to be able to order a drink again without feeling like some sort of criminal!"

Charlie Chan's black eyes twinkled. Before prohibition started, Bill Artemas was undoubtedly too young to order anything but milk.

"Those temperance people went too far, gentlemen," the steward remarked. "And to go too far is just as wrong as to fall short. In trying to reform drinkers they merely created more. What's your pleasure, Mr. Chan?"

"Juice of orange, thank you so much."

"Coming right up."

When the steward was out of earshot, Bill leaned over the table and regarded Charlie Chan imploringly. "What can we do, Mr. Chan? Who is she? What does that empty Chinese cookie mean? Is it a message of some kind?"

Charlie regarded the other man searchingly. "Girl you saw was Chinese?"

"Oh, no," Bill Artemas said quickly, "she was beautiful!" After a moment's pause he added, "I hope you don't misunderstand me, Mr. Chan. I mean, Chinese girls are beautiful too."

The detective chuckled. "No apologies necessary. Poets of all nations have told us where beauty truly lies: in eyes of men. To this poor person, apogee of all that is beautiful resides in home on top of Punchbowl Hill. To others merely large uninteresting family of Chinese."

Despite the other's unoffended air, Bill was becoming more embarrassed. "No, really,

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Mr. Chan, I really do think Chinese girls are beautiful. In a strange and special way. Even more beautiful than white girls on the whole."

"But beautiful in a way that is unattainable. Society decrees that Chinese girl as unavailable to you as another man's wife. Thus an exotic beauty to be admired but not to seek for company. Not to make you lovesick as you are over girl on deck. Is it not so?"

"I think you're right, Mr. Chan. One glimpse of that girl has changed my life. If only we knew who she is."

"One hurdle already cleared. I know young lady's identity."

"You do?" Bill exclaimed.

The Chinese detective nodded slightly and pulled a newspaper clipping from his jacket pocket. He offered it to Bill for inspection.

Professor Sought in University Murder

Dr. Albert Kane, University of California Professor of Chinese Classics, is being sought by Berkeley police in connection with the murder of a student, Wilbur Clayton of Santa Rosa.

Young Clayton was found shot to death last Sunday in Strawberry Canyon on a secluded part of the Berkeley campus. Close friends report that Clayton, a Chinese Classics student, had threatened to take action for plagiarism against Kane, claiming substantial parts of a recent book by Kane were actually Clayton's work.

Detectives found evidence that Professor Kane has fled his Berkeley apartment. Also apparently missing is Karen Drummond, a secretary in the Chinese Classics Department.

Photographs of Kane, a nondescript fair-haired man of early middle-age, and of Karen Drummond, a young and strikingly attractive brunette, were included in the newspaper report. Bill stared fixedly at the girl's picture.

"Missing girl and girl on deck are the same young lady perhaps?"

"No perhaps about it. That's her! But how did you know?"

"Young lady's thoughts simple enough for simple man to follow. Young lady wishes to tell us she is being held against her will, finds chance to give message to fellow passenger without detection by person accompanying her. She has saved fortune cookie served with Chinese dinner in San Francisco, has saved same in one piece, maybe a souvenir. Has removed fortune slip, for even rare lady who can leave

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cookie uncracked cannot leave fortune unread. Many fortune cookies allow removal of fortune slip without cracking.

"Lady chooses fortune cookie to represent silent call for help. Her action doubly clever: bright young man, confronted with mystery and with supposedly Chinese confection, naturally seeks out only Chinese detective on board. Due to undeserved attention gathered by this humble person, search fairly easy to consummate.

"There is clue for you. Clue for me: young and desperate lady attaches great importance to supposed Chinese symbol. Secretary of Chinese Classics professor who may be murderer is missing. Connection not too difficult to see."

"But, Mr. Chan, this Kane fellow may have found out she's trying to make contact with people. She could be in great danger. He could throw her overboard."

"More calm, please. Calm much more helpful than panic, is it not so? Why did girl accompany fleeing murder suspect?"

"Well, maybe she saw something, saw the crime committed. And he forced her to come with him."

"Then why would murderer not kill her at once?"

"Well—I don't know—"

"And if fleeing, why would murderer bring girl? Flight strong indication of probable guilt. If guilt admitted through flight, why carry off witness?"

Bill looked blank.

"Kane loves young lady," Charlie explained. "Freedom alone not enough for suspect's happiness. Must have girl as well. Murder suspects and even murderers are men as you and I, Mr. Artemas."

This unquestionable truth dawned on Bill Artemas. "He wants to make her love him. Like Lon Chaney in *The Phantom of the Opera.*"

"Maybe girl love him, too. Maybe not know about murder until vessel leave, then saw newspaper and realized traveling companion is murderer."

"I don't think she could love him," Bill said fiercely. "That story sounds very fishy to me."

"Sound much like gilled creature to humble self as well," said Charlie, smiling. "Abduction more likely theory than love reciprocated by young lady. But girl could feign love. Is plenty smart."

"We'd better try and find the professor quick, though. She may not be able to fool him much longer, if that's what she's doing. How can we find him?"

"Maybe not so difficult, Mr. Artemas."

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Bill looked thoughtful. "I'll bet he's disguised."

Charlie bowed. "Most helpful, thank you so much. Kane's face hard to recognize—look like many men. Still must cover face somehow—maybe beard, dark glasses. Or maybe more subtle way of concealing features."

Bill cast a surreptitious glance around the room and saw that likely candidates abounded. An elderly man in a wheel chair seemed a likely possibility to the aspiring sleuth. With a nod Bill pointed out the man to Charlie.

The Chinese detective chuckled. "Thank you so much, but hanging skin of neck, liver spots of hands, dead look in eye bespeak talent for makeup worthy of aforementioned Mr. Chaney. Maybe carry comparison too far?"

"I guess so." But Bill Artemas was not discouraged. He had learned at Stanford never to give up, especially if the adversary was from Berkeley.

He lowered his voice. "The gent with the bald head and monocle. He looks like a stage Englishman to me."

"Shares said quality with many real Englishmen. Distinguished gentleman is Lord Barnstock, former Home Secretary. So sorry."

The steward returned with their drinks.

"There we are, gents—Scotch and soda and orange juice."

Bill Artemas paid for both drinks automatically, his good breeding pushing him even closer to pennilessness.

"Thank you so much," said Charlie Chan.

"Your first trip to Hawaii, Mr. Artemas?" the steward inquired politely.

"Yes, it is," Bill replied. "I hear it's beautiful."

"Oh, yes, indeed. You will—"

A growling voice from another table interrupted the steward who seemed about to embark on a travel lecture. "Steward, blast you! I want some service!" The growler was a fat balding businessman in a flowered shirt. He was accompanied by a pleasant-looking lady who seemed somewhat ashamed of his behavior.

"You'll excuse me," said the steward. "When the wind blows, the grass must bend, as they say."

He scurried away.

"That man's a boorish sort," said Bill, glancing at the angry tourist.

"Very drunk early in day. When sober, maybe different."

"Could he be the professor? That would be quite a disguise—but the fat looks real,

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and who could the lady with him be? Besides, he probably wouldn't call that much attention to himself."

"Maybe," said Charlie, looking thoughtful. "And maybe exact opposite. By observing man's fault, you may know his virtues."

"Huh? Who said that? Confucius?"

"Yes, a man often quoted. A very wise man, but not always quoted for his wisdom."

Bill Artemas looked puzzled. "I don't understand."

"Soon will."

Charlie lifted a finger and summoned the steward, who rushed over, having placated his rude customer.

"Yes, Mr. Chan? Can I get you something else? Or is something wrong with the drinks?"

"Should there be something wrong with them?"

"I doubt it. I made them very carefully. The cautious seldom err."

"But the foolish do, Dr. Kane! Sit down, please."

The steward swallowed. "I'm not allowed to. But why did you call me that name? I'm not—"

"You make no attempt to disguise features, Dr. Kane. Why not? You think maybe steward go unnoticed like 'Invisible Man' in story by Mr. Chesterton? You are maybe too confident. Much too confident when foolish vanity makes you quote Confucius three times to Charlie Chan and not think he will associate you with missing professor of Chinese Classics. 'To go too far is just as wrong as to fall short.' 'When the wind blows, the grass must bend.' 'The cautious seldom err.' Not the best translations, but meanings clear."

The steward smiled slightly. "I'll be damned. I took you too lightly."

Bill Artemas absorbed this with an open mouth. Finally he remembered his heroic role and asked the impostor-steward, in a low voice between clenched teeth, "What have you done with Miss Drummond? Where is she?"

"She's safe," he said. "She didn't want to come, but I forced her to. I should have known it was no good. I killed Will Clayton. I'll confess it—it's good to have it off my chest."

Dr. Albert Kane walked slowly down the passageway to the crew's quarters and pushed open the door of his cabin. The three men accompanying him—Bill Artemas, Charlie Chan, and Captain Vernon, the S.S. Waikiki's veteran skipper—couldn't all enter the cubby-hole, but they could see the girl

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sitting on the edge of the bunk.

Bill saw the same terror-stricken eyes he'd seen the night before on the deck. She stared from face to face, as if unsure of their intentions.

Bill smiled encouragingly. "You're safe now, Karen." But the fear did not leave her eyes.

Captain Vernon looked from the frightened girl to Albert Kane. "So we signed on an escaping murderer, eh? It was easy for him—he worked for us years ago, but under another name, George Allison, he called himself."

"Summers when I was in college," explained Kane. "I used an assumed name because I didn't want my family to find out I was working as a ship's steward. I'm glad this is over with. I made a terrible mistake in shooting Clayton and then kidnaping Karen and now I'm ready to pay for it."

Charlie Chan spoke for the first time in several minutes. "Contradiction, please. Case not closed that easily." He turned to Bill Artemas. "Humbly regret deceiving you, Mr. Artemas, by not telling all I know of Clayton murder case. I have worked with honorable Berkeley police in this case and have facts you do not. But I think facts you see lead to same conclusion reached by humble self."

Charlie paused, but none of his listeners spoke. They watched him intently, wondering what his next words would be.

He turned to the girl sitting on the bunk. "You are murderer of Wilbur Clayton, Miss Karen Drummond."

The stricken look in the girl's eye told everyone present why terror had not left her when it seemed her rescue had been effected.

"Berkeley police get in touch with me shortly before we leave San Francisco: they find plenty evidence pointing to Karen Drummond as murderer of Wilbur Clayton. Motive is jealousy. Clayton leave her for other girl. Karen, plenty angry, pay attention to advances of Professor Kane who love her all of two years she has worked in his office. But she want to stop plagiarism suit by Clayton who got secret evidence of same from Karen Drummond.

"So she kills Clayton when meeting him alone in Strawberry Canyon. Convinces Kane he Number One suspect, must flee. He takes old job on ship under old alias, helps her to stow away. Everybody thinks she fleeing with him, but he fleeing with her."

Bill Artemas looked angry. He had three reasons which he threw at Charlie one after the other.

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"You didn't solve this case! The Berkeley police did! And how'd they know Kane would take this ship?"

Charlie bowed. "Very true that police work always cooperative venture. But Berkeley detectives not know Kane and Miss Drummond taking S.S. Waikiki. They gave findings to humble self because of earlier consultation on case. This poor person's small contribution only to find professor among possible disguises on ship—and he has only disguise of servitude and anonymity."

"You lied to me, Mr. Chan. You said Kane was the murderer."

"Correction, please. Never say Kane is murderer. Only tell you what girl wants us to think."

"All right, all right, but how the heck could I have figured all this out?"

"Should be quite clear to you, Mr. Artemas, if not blinded by youthful infatuation. Girl on deck more likely murderer than Kane. She gives you fortune cookie to suggest desire to escape. But why does she not speak? Why not run to captain for safety? How can Kane hold her? Terror clearly feigned, desire to frame Kane for murder, then disappear and cover own tracks. For her love for Professor Kane not real as his for her. She gladly throw him to police, knowing he will take blame, not implicate her in crime.

"Final and conclusive link: Kane brings us here and shows us girl sitting in unlocked cabin and not tied at all. How could he keep her thus against her will? If you not know real murderer when we find untied girl in unlocked cabin, still terrified after rescue, symptoms of lovesickness clear indeed."

"It's true, all true," admitted the girl on the bunk. "I shot Will and I'd do it again—and if I had to, I'd kill you all."

Bill looked at her face, beautiful even in treachery, and felt remorse at this vicious statement. But then he looked at the distraught professor and Bill knew he'd escaped comparatively easily in the painful game of love.

With both fugitives in the captain's custody, Bill walked down the passageway seeking the deck's bracing sea air. Charlie was by his side.

"Plenty beautiful girls in Hawaii, Mr. Artemas," the Chinese detective said. "I take you home to Punchbowl Hill for plenty good dinner. You will come?"

"Yes, I will, thank you. Chinese girls really are beautiful, you know. Do you have daughters, Mr. Chan?"

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 353rd "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . Can a story be amusing and terrifying at the same time? We found it so—for a special reason . . .

The author, Lois Garcia, is a former nurse, now married to a doctor; they have three children. When she is not being a busy wife, mother, and homemaker, Lois Garcia turns her attention to her three hobbies: oil painting, activity in community affairs, and—you've guessed it—reading mystery stories . . .

DEATH COMES TO ...

by LOIS GARCIA

Editor,
Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine

Dear Sir:

I am very confused and so are you. I have been writing stories for your magazine for a whole year now, and you have not purchased any. Why? That is what I ask myself.

I read your magazine all the time, along with all of your competition. I have always wanted to be a mystery writer, and am always thinking up new ways to kill someone. It is easy. Everyone I know thinks I am a very good writer. I tell my plots to people and they always tell me to get them out of my head and put them on paper.

Where I used to work they thought so highly of my ideas that they told me to stay home and write them all down. I had figured out a way to kill everyone at the plant. That was in my stories *Death Comes to the Plant, Death Comes to the Steel Factory* and *Death Comes to the Metal Factory.*

After I had figured out a way to murder everyone at the plant I decided to branch out instead of specializing. I have stayed home now for a whole year writing every day, just like a writer should. Ideas do not

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come so fast when you are home all the time, but because I am good at thinking, I found many plots that other mystery writers have not thought of. Two of them were in my stories *Death Comes to the Paper Boy* and *Death Comes to the Man Next Door.*

I use a new way to kill people in all of my stories. My wife wonders where I get the ideas. She doesn't know that she has given me some of them, like in my story *Death Comes to the Telephone Talker.*

I am very anxious to have my stories published and to start making a lot of money. That is why I am asking you to please offer me some help. Tell me why you don't like my stories, instead of just sending them back with rejection slips. Besides, it takes too long for me to get them back. For a while I thought the mailman was keeping them for himself. I know that wasn't true, but I did get a story *Death Comes to the Mailman* from that idea.

It costs a lot of money to be a writer. I had to buy a second-hand typewriter, and all that paper costs a fortune. You in your ivory tower probably don't know what it costs me to mail you the three stories a week.

My wife had to go back to work because you are not buying my stories. She is working as a waitress and meets a lot of interesting people. I poisoned some of them in my story *Death Comes to the Diner.* My wife likes to work. She said that since I am writing all the time, she is very glad to get out of the house. She is thinking of getting a second job nights. Do you have any suggestions where she should work so as to give me new plot ideas?

I am also running out of ideas on which people to kill. I killed the minister in *Death Comes to the Church* and most of the congregation in my story *Death Comes to the Church Picnic.* I have killed all the people shopping in *Death Comes Downtown.* I figure I have killed about 8250 people in my town of 10,000.

Anyway, I am getting sick of you always sending back my stories and I might start sending my stories to another magazine.

I am sending this letter with a request that you start publishing me. Please read the story I am sending with this letter. I am signing off with my pen name.

Very sincerely yours,

Buzz Saw

P.S. The name of the enclosed story is *Death Comes to the Editor.*

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a HERCULE POIROT detective story by

AGATHA CHRISTIE

An early case in the career of Hercule Poirot—the mystery of the stolen miniatures . . .

"All the same, mon ami," said Poirot, "there are one or two curious points . . .

"You know—it is my weakness—I like to keep my little secrets till the end."

DOUBLE SIN

by AGATHA CHRISTIE

I HAD CALLED IN AT MY friend Poirot's rooms to find him sadly overworked. So much had he become the rage that every rich woman who had mislaid a bracelet or lost a pet kitten rushed to secure the services of the great Hercule Poirot. My little friend was a strange mixture of Flemish thrift and artistic fervor. He accepted many cases in which he had little interest owing to the first instinct being predominant.

He also undertook cases in which there was a little or no monetary reward sheerly because the problem involved interested him. The result was that, as I say, he was overworking himself. He admitted as much himself, and I found little difficulty in persuading him to accompany me for a week's holiday to that well-known South Coast resort, Ebermouth.

We had spent four very agreeable days when Poirot came to me, an open letter in his hand.

"*Mon ami*, you remember my friend Joseph Aarons, the theatrical agent?"

I assented after a moment's thought. Poirot's friends are so many and so varied, and range from dustmen to dukes.

"*Eh bien*, Hastings, Joseph Aarons finds himself at Charlock Bay. He is far from well, and there is a little affair that seems to be worrying him. He

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begs me to go over and see him. I think, *mon ami*, that I must accede to his request. He is a faithful friend, the good Joseph Aarons, and has done much to assist me in the past."

"Certainly, if you think so," I said. "I believe Charlock Bay is a beautiful spot, and as it happens I've never been there."

"Then we combine business with pleasure," said Poirot. "You will inquire the trains?"

"It will probably mean a change or two," I said with a grimace. "You know what these cross-country lines are. To go from the South Devon coast to the North Devon coast is sometimes a day's journey."

However, on inquiry, I found that the journey could be accomplished by only one change at Exeter and that the trains were good. I was hastening back to Poirot with the information when I happened to pass the offices of the Speedy cars and saw written up:

Tomorrow. All-day excursion to Charlock Bay. Starting 8:30 through some of the most beautiful scenery in Devon.

I inquired a few particulars and returned to the hotel full of enthusiasm. Unfortunately, I found it hard to make Poirot share my feelings.

"My friend, why this passion for the motor coach? The train, see you, it is sure? The tires, they do not burst; the accidents, they do not happen. One is not incommoded by too much air. The windows can be shut and no drafts admitted."

I hinted delicately that the advantage of fresh air was what attracted me most to the motor-coach scheme.

"And if it rains? Your English climate is so uncertain."

"There's a hood and all that. Besides, if it rains badly, the excursion doesn't take place."

"Ah!" said Poirot. "Then let us hope that it rains."

"Of course, if you feel like that and—"

"No, no, *mon ami*. I see that you have set your heart on the trip. Fortunately, I have my greatcoat with me and two mufflers." He sighed. "But shall we have sufficient time at Charlock Bay?"

"Well, I'm afraid it means staying the night there. You see, the tour goes round by Dartmoor. We have lunch at Monkhampton. We arrive at Charlock Bay about four o'clock, and the coach starts back at five, arriving here at ten o'clock."

"So!" said Poirot. "And there are people who do this pleasure! We shall, of course, get a reduction of the fare since

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we do not make the return journey?"

"I hardly think that's likely."

"You must insist."

"Come now, Poirot, don't be mean. You know you're coining money."

"My friend, it is not the meanness. It is the business sense. If I were a millionaire I would pay only what was just and right."

As I had foreseen, however, Poirot was doomed to fail in this respect. The gentleman who issued tickets at the Speedy office was calm and unimpassioned but adamant. His point was that we ought to return. He even implied that we ought to pay extra for the privilege of leaving the coach at Charlock Bay.

Defeated, Poirot paid over the required sum and left the office.

"The English, they have no sense of money," he grumbled. "Did you observe a young man, Hastings, who paid over the full fare and yet mentioned his intention of leaving the coach at Monkhampton?"

"I don't think I did. As a matter of fact—"

"You were observing the pretty young lady who booked Number Five, the next seat to ours. Ah! Yes, my friend, I saw you. And that is why when I was on the point of taking seats Number Thirteen and Number Fourteen—which are in the middle and as well sheltered as it is possible to be—you rudely pushed yourself forward and said that Three and Four would be better."

"Really, Poirot," I said, blushing.

"Auburn hair—always the auburn hair!"

"At any rate, she was more worth looking at than an odd young man."

"That depends upon the point of view. To me, the young man was more interesting."

Something rather significant in Poirot's tone made me look at him quickly. "Why? What do you mean?"

"Oh! Do not excite yourself. Shall I say that he interested me because he was trying to grow a mustache and as yet the result is poor." Poirot stroked his own magnificent mustache tenderly. "It is an art," he murmured, "the growing of the mustache! I have sympathy for all who attempt it."

It is always difficult with Poirot to know when he is serious and when he is merely amusing himself at one's expense. I judged it safest to say no more.

The following morning dawned bright and sunny. A

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really glorious day! Poirot, however, was taking no chances. He wore a woolly waistcoat, a mackintosh, a heavy overcoat, and two mufflers, in addition to wearing his thickest suit. He also swallowed two tablets of "Anti-grippe" before starting and packed a further supply.

We took a couple of small suitcases with us. The pretty girl we had noticed the day before had a small suitcase, and so did the young man whom I gathered to have been the object of Poirot's sympathy. Otherwise, there was no luggage. The four pieces were stowed away by the driver, and we all took our places.

Poirot, rather maliciously, I thought, assigned me the outside place as "I had the mania for the fresh air" and himself occupied the seat next to our fair neighbor. Presently, however, he made amends. The man in seat 6 was a noisy fellow, inclined to be facetious and boisterous, and Poirot asked the girl in a low voice if she would like to change seats with him. She agreed gratefully, and, the change having been effected, she entered into conversation with us and we were soon all three chattering merrily.

She was evidently quite young, not more than nineteen, and as ingenuous as a child. She soon confided to us the reason for her trip. She was going, it seemed, on business for her aunt who kept a most interesting antique shop in Ebermouth.

This aunt had been left in very reduced circumstances on the death of her father and had used her small capital and a houseful of beautiful things which her father had left to start in business. She had been extremely successful and had made quite a name for herself in the trade. This girl, Mary Durrant, had come to live with her aunt and learn the business and was very excited about it—much preferring it to the other alternative, becoming a governess or companion.

Poirot nodded interest and approval to all this.

"Mademoiselle will be successful, I am sure," he said gallantly. "But I will give her a little word of advice. Do not be too trusting, mademoiselle. Everywhere in the world there are rogues and rascals, even it may be on this very coach of ours. One should always be on the guard, suspicious!"

She stared at him open-mouthed, and he nodded sapiently.

"But, yes, it is as I say. Who knows? Even I who speak to you may be a malefactor of the worst description."

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And he twinkled more than ever at her surprised face.

We stopped for lunch at Monkhampton, and after a few words with the waiter, Poirot managed to secure us a small table for three close by the window. Outside, in a big courtyard, about twenty *char-a-bancs* were parked—*char-a-bancs* which had come from all over the county. The hotel dining room was full, and the noise was rather considerable.

"One can have altogether too much of the holiday spirit," I said with a grimace.

Mary Durrant agreed. "Ebermouth is quite spoiled in the summers nowadays. My aunt says it used to be quite different. Now one can hardly get along the pavements for the crowd."

"But it is good for business, mademoiselle."

"Not for ours particularly. We sell only rare and valuable things. We do not go in for cheap bric-a-brac. My aunt has clients all over England. If they want a particular period table or chair, or a certain piece of china, they write to her, and sooner or later she gets it for them. That is what has happened in this case."

We looked interested and she went on to explain. A certain American gentleman, Mr. J. Baker Wood, was a connoisseur and collector of miniatures. A very valuable set of miniatures had recently come into the market, and Miss Elizabeth Penn—Mary's aunt—had purchased them. She had written to Mr. Wood describing the miniatures and naming a price. He had replied at once, saying that he was prepared to purchase if the miniatures were as represented and asking that someone should be sent with them for him to see where he was staying at Charlock Bay. Miss Durrant had accordingly been dispatched, acting as representative for the firm.

"They're lovely things, of course," she said. "But I can't imagine anyone paying all that money for them. Five hundred pounds! Just think of it! They're by Cosway. Is it Cosway I mean? I get so mixed up in these things."

Poirot smiled. "You are not yet experienced, eh, mademoiselle?"

"I've had no training," said Mary ruefully. "We weren't brought up to know about old things. It's a lot to learn."

She sighed. Then suddenly I saw her eyes widen in surprise. She was sitting facing the window and her glance now was directed out of that window into the courtyard. With a hurried word she rose from her seat and almost ran out of the

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room. She returned in a few moments, breathless and apologetic.

"I'm so sorry rushing off like that. But I thought I saw a man taking my suitcase out of the coach. I went flying after him, and it turned out to be his own. It's one almost exactly like mine. I felt like such a fool. It looked as though I were accusing him of stealing it."

She laughed at the idea.

Poirot, however, did not laugh. "What man was it, mademoiselle? Describe him to me."

"He had on a brown suit. A thin weedy young man with a very indeterminate mustache."

"Aha," said Poirot. "Our friend of yesterday, Hastings. You know this young man, mademoiselle? You have seen him before?"

"No, never. Why?"

"Nothing. It is rather curious—that is all."

He relapsed into silence and took no further part in the conversation until something Mary Durrant said caught his attention.

"Eh, mademoiselle, what is that you say?"

"I said that on my return journey I should have to be careful of 'malefactors,' as you call them. I believe Mr. Wood always pays for things in cash. If I have five hundred pounds in notes on me, I shall be worth some malefactor's attention."

She laughed but again Poirot did not respond. Instead he asked her what hotel she proposed to stay at in Charlock Bay.

"The Anchor Hotel. It is small and not expensive, but quite good."

"So!" said Poirot. "The Anchor Hotel. Precisely where Hastings here has made up his mind to stay. How odd!"

He twinkled at me.

"You are staying long in Charlock Bay?" asked Mary.

"One night only. I have business there. You could not guess, I am sure, what my profession is, mademoiselle?"

I saw Mary consider several possibilities and reject them—probably from a feeling of caution. At last she hazarded the suggestion that Poirot was a professional conjurer. He was vastly entertained.

"Ah! But it is an idea that! You think I take the rabbits out of the hat? No, mademoiselle. Me, I am the opposite of a conjurer. The conjurer, he makes things disappear. Me, I make things that have disappeared, reappear." He leaned forward dramatically so as to give the words full effect. "It is a secret, mademoiselle, but I will tell you, I am a detective!"

He leaned back in his chair

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pleased with the effect he had created. Mary Durrant stared at him spellbound. But any further conversation was barred for the braying of various horns outside announced that the road monsters were ready to proceed.

As Poirot and I went out together I commented on the charm of our luncheon companion. Poirot agreed.

"Yes, she is charming. But, also rather silly?"

"Silly?"

"Do not be outraged. A girl may be beautiful and have auburn hair and yet be silly. It is the height of foolishness to take two strangers into her confidence as she has done."

"Well, she could see we were all right."

"That is imbecile, what you say, my friend. Anyone who knows his job—naturally he will appear 'all right.' That little one she talked of being careful when she would have five hundred pounds in money with her. But she has five hundred pounds with her now."

"In miniatures."

"Exactly. In miniatures. And between one and the other, there is no great difference, *mon ami.*"

"But no one knows about them except us."

"And the waiter and the people at the next table. And, doubtless, several people in Ebermouth! Mademoiselle Durrant, she is charming, but, if I were Miss Elizabeth Penn, I would first of all instruct my new assistant in the common sense." He paused and then said in a different voice, "You know, my friend, it would be the easiest thing in the world to remove a suitcase from one of those *char-a-bancs* while we were all at luncheon."

"Oh, come now, Poirot, somebody would have seen."

"And what would they see? Somebody removing his luggage. It could be done in an open and aboveboard manner, and it would be nobody's business to interfere."

"Do you mean—Poirot, are you hinting—but that fellow in the brown suit—it was his own suitcase?"

Poirot frowned. "So it seems. All the same, it is curious, Hastings, that he should have not removed his suitcase before, when the car first arrived. He has not lunched here, you notice."

"If Miss Durrant hadn't been sitting opposite the window, she wouldn't have seen him," I said slowly.

"And since it was his own suitcase, that would not have mattered," said Poirot. "So let us dismiss it from our thoughts, *mon ami.*"

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Nevertheless, when we had resumed our places and were speeding along once more, he took the opportunity of giving Mary Durrant a further lecture on the dangers of indiscretion which she received meekly enough but with the air of thinking it all rather a joke.

We arrived at Charlock Bay at four o'clock and were fortunate enough to be able to get rooms at the Anchor Hotel—a charming old-world inn on one of the side streets.

Poirot had just unpacked a few necessaries and was applying a little cosmetic to his mustache preparatory to going out to call upon Joseph Aarons when there came a frenzied knocking at the door. I called, "Come in," and to my utter amazement Mary Durrant appeared, her face white and large tears standing in her eyes.

"I do beg your pardon—but—but the most awful thing has happened. And you did say you were a detective?" This to Poirot.

"What has happened, mademoiselle?"

"I opened my suitcase. The miniatures were in a crocodile dispatch case—locked, of course. Now, look!"

She held out a small square crocodile-covered case. The lid hung loose. Poirot took it from her. The case had been forced; considerable strength must have been used. The marks were plain enough. Poirot examined it and nodded.

"The miniatures?" he asked, though we both knew the answer well enough.

"Gone. They've been stolen! Oh, what shall I do?"

"Don't worry," I said. "My friend is Hercule Poirot. You must have heard of him. He'll get them back for you if anyone can."

"Monsieur Poirot. The great Monsieur Poirot."

Poirot was vain enough to be pleased at the obvious reverence in her voice. "Yes, my child," he said. "It is I, myself. And you can leave your little affair in my hands. I will do all that can be done. But I fear—I much fear—that it will be too late. Tell me, was the lock of your suitcase forced also?"

She shook her head.

"Let me see it, please."

We went together to her room, and Poirot examined the suitcase closely. It had obviously been opened with a key.

"Which is simple enough. These suitcase locks are all much of the same pattern. *Eh, bien*, we must ring up the police and we must also get in touch with Mr. Baker Wood as soon as possible. I will attend to that myself."

I went with him and asked

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what he meant by saying it might be too late. "*Mon cher*, I said today that I was the opposite of the conjurer—that I make the disappearing things reappear. But suppose someone has been beforehand with me. You do not understand? You will in a minute."

He disappeared into the telephone booth. He came out five minutes later looking very grave. "It is as I feared. A lady called upon Mr. Wood with the miniatures half an hour ago. She represented herself as coming from Miss Elizabeth Penn. He was delighted with the miniatures and paid for them forthwith."

"Half an hour ago—before we arrived here."

Poirot smiled rather enigmatically. "The Speedy cars are quite speedy, but a fast motor from, say, Monkhampton would get here a good hour ahead of them at least."

"And what do we do now?"

"The good Hastings—always practical. We inform the police, do all we can for Miss Durrant, and—yes, I think decidedly that we have an interview with Mr. J. Baker Wood."

We carried out this program. Poor Mary Durrant was terribly upset, fearing her aunt would blame her.

"Which she probably will," observed Poirot, as we set out for the Seaside Hotel where Mr. Wood was staying. "And with perfect justice. The idea of leaving five hundred pounds' worth of valuables in a suitcase and going to lunch! All the same, *mon ami*, there are one or two curious points about the case. That dispatch box, for instance, why was it forced?"

"To get out the miniatures."

"But was not that a foolishness? Say our thief is tampering with the luggage at lunchtime under the pretext of getting out his own. Surely it is much simpler to open the suitcase, transfer the dispatch case unopened to his own suitcase, and get away, than to waste the time forcing the lock?"

"He had to make sure the miniatures were inside."

Poirot did not look convinced, but, as we were just being shown into Mr. Wood's suite, we had no time for more discussion.

I took an immediate dislike to Mr. Baker Wood.

He was a large vulgar man, very much overdressed and wearing a diamond solitaire ring. He was blustering and noisy.

Of course, he'd not suspected anything amiss. Why should he? The woman said she had the miniatures all right. Very fine specimens, too! Had he the

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numbers of the banknotes? No, he hadn't. And who was Mr.—er—Poirot, anyway, to come asking him all these questions?

"I will not ask you anything more, monsieur, except for one thing. A description of the woman who called upon you. Was she young and pretty?"

"No, sir, she was not. Most emphatically not. A tall woman, middle-aged, gray hair, blotchy complexion, and a budding mustache. A siren? Not on your life."

"Poirot," I cried, as we took our departure. "A mustache. Did you hear?"

"I have the use of my ears, thank you, Hastings."

"But what a very unpleasant man."

"He has not the charming manner, no."

"Well, we ought to get the thief all right," I remarked. "We can identify him."

"You are of such a naive simplicity, Hastings. Do you not know that there is such a thing as an alibi?"

"You think he will have an alibi?"

Poirot replied unexpectedly. "I sincerely hope so."

"The trouble with you is," I said, "that you like a thing to be difficult."

"Quite right, *mon ami.* I do not like—how do you say it—the bird who sits!"

Poirot's prophecy was fully justified. Our traveling companion in the brown suit turned out to be a Mr. Norton Kane. He had gone straight to the George Hotel at Monkhampton and had been there during the afternoon. The only evidence against him was that of Miss Durrant who declared that she had seen him getting out his luggage from the coach while we were at lunch.

"Which in itself is not a suspicious act," said Poirot meditatively.

After that remark he lapsed into silence and refused to discuss the matter any further, saying, when I pressed him, that he was thinking of mustaches in general, and that I should be well advised to do the same.

I discovered, however, that he had asked Joseph Aarons—with whom he spent the evening—to give him every detail possible about Mr. Baker Wood. As both men were staying at the same hotel, there was a chance of gleaning some stray crumbs of information. Whatever Poirot learned, he kept to himself, however.

Mary Durrant after various interviews with the police, had returned to Ebermouth by an early morning train. We lunched with Joseph Aarons, and, after lunch, Poirot announced to me

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that he had settled the theatrical agent's problem satisfactorily, and that we could return to Ebermouth as soon as we liked. "But not by road, *mon ami;* we go by rail this time."

"Are you afraid of having your pocket picked, or of meeting another damsel in distress?"

"Both those affairs, Hastings, might happen to me on the train. No, I am in haste to be back in Ebermouth, because I want to proceed with our case."

"Our case?"

"But, yes, my friend. Mademoiselle Durrant appealed to me to help her. Because the matter is now in the hands of the police, it does not follow that I am free to wash my hands of it. I came here to oblige an old friend, but it shall never be said of Hercule Poirot that he deserted a stranger in need!" And he drew himself up grandiloquently.

"I think you were interested before that," I said shrewdly. "In the coach office, when you first caught sight of that young man, though what drew your attention to him I don't know."

"Don't you, Hastings? You should. Well, well, that must remain my little secret."

We had a short conversation with the police inspector in charge of the case before leaving. He had had an interview with Mr. Norton Kane, and told Poirot in confidence that the young man's manner had not impressed him favorably. He had blustered, denied, and contradicted himself.

"But just how the trick was done, I don't know," he confessed. "He could have handed the stuff to a confederate who pushed off at once in a fast car. But that's just theory. We've got to find the car and the confederate and pin the thing down."

Poirot nodded thoughtfully.

"Do you think that was how it was done?" I asked him, as we were seated in the train.

"No, my friend, that was not how it was done. It was cleverer than that."

"Won't you tell me?"

"Not yet. You know—it is my weakness—I like to keep my little secrets till the end."

"Is the end going to be soon?"

"Very soon now."

We arrived in Ebermouth a little after six and Poirot drove at once to the shop which bore the name "Elizabeth Penn." The establishment was closed, but Poirot rang the bell, and presently Mary herself opened the door, and expressed surprise and delight at seeing us.

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"Please come in and see my aunt," she said.

She led us into a back room. An elderly lady came forward to meet us; she had white hair and looked rather like a miniature herself with her pink-and-white skin and her blue eyes. Round her rather bent shoulders she wore a cape of priceless old lace.

"Is this the great Monsieur Poirot?" she asked in a low charming voice. "Mary has been telling me. I could hardly believe it. And you will really help us in our trouble. You will advise us?"

Poirot looked at her for a moment, then bowed.

"Mademoiselle Penn, the effect is charming. But you should really grow a mustache."

Miss Penn gave a gasp and drew back.

"You were absent from business yesterday, were you not?"

"I was here in the morning. Later I had a bad headache and went directly home."

"Not home, mademoiselle. For your headache you tried the change of air, did you not? The air of Charlock Bay is very bracing, I believe."

He took me by the arm and drew me toward the door. He paused there and spoke over his shoulder.

"You comprehend, I know everything. This little—farce—it must cease."

There was a menace in his tone. Miss Penn, her face ghastly white, nodded mutely. Poirot turned to the girl.

"Mademoiselle," he said gently, "you are young and charming. But participating in these little affairs will lead that youth and charm to being hidden behind prison walls—and I, Hercule Poirot, tell you that will be a pity."

Then he stepped out into the street and I followed him, bewildered.

"From the first, *mon ami*, I was interested. When that young man booked his place as far as Monkhampton only, I saw the girl's attention suddenly riveted on him. Now why? He was not of the type to make a woman look at him for himself alone. When we started on that coach, I had a feeling that something would happen. Who saw the young man tampering with the luggage? Mademoiselle and mademoiselle only, and remember she chose that seat—a seat facing the window—a most unfeminine choice.

"And then she comes to us with the tale of robbery—the dispatch box forced which makes not the common sense, as I told you at the time.

"And what is the result of it

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all? Mr. Baker Wood has paid over good money for stolen goods. The miniatures will be returned to Miss Penn. She will sell them and will have made a thousand pounds instead of five hundred. I make the discreet inquiries and learn that her business is in a bad state—touch and go. I say to myself—the aunt and niece are in this together."

"Then you never suspected Norton Kane?"

"*Mon ami!* With that mustache? A criminal is either clean-shaven or he has a proper mustache that can be removed at will. But what an opportunity for the clever Miss Penn—a shrinking elderly lady with a pink-and-white complexion as we saw her. But if she holds herself erect, wears large boots, alters her complexion with a few unseemly blotches and—crowning touch—adds a few sparse hairs to her upper lip. What then? A masculine woman, according to Mr. Wood, and—'a man in disguise' say we at once."

"She really went to Charlock yesterday?"

"Assuredly. The train, as you may remember telling me, left here at eleven and got to Charlock Bay at two o'clock. Then the return train is even quicker—the one we came by. It leaves Charlock at four five and gets here at six fifteen. Naturally, the miniatures were never in the dispatch case at all. That was artistically forced before being packed. Mademoiselle Mary has only to find a couple of mugs who will be sympathetic to her charm and champion beauty in distress. But one of the mugs was no mug—he was Hercule Poirot!"

I hardly liked the inference. I said hurriedly, "Then, when you said you were helping a stranger, you were willfully deceiving me. That's exactly what you were doing."

"Never do I deceive you, Hastings. I only permit you to deceive yourself. I was referring to Mr. Baker Wood—a stranger to these shores." His face darkened. "Ah! When I think of that imposition, that iniquitous over-charge—the same fare single to Charlock as return—my blood boils to protect the visitor! Not a pleasant man, Mr. Baker Wood, not, as you would say, sympathetic. But a visitor! And we visitors, Hastings, must stand together. Me? I am all for the visitors!"

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a NEW Rand counterspy story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

Here is the 18th in the series of new stories about Rand, the Double-C man . . . in which Rand is sent to Cairo on what might or might not be a Concealed Communications case. His mission is to find a murderer and to solve the mystery of Jason D.

But who is Jason D?—or what? . . .

THE SPY AND THE NILE MERMAID

by EDWARD D. HOCH

IT BEGAN, AS SO MANY of Rand's special assignments did, in the book-lined office of Security's graying Chief of Staff, Henry Hastings. He had acquired new duties, and new responsibilities, since the retirement of Colonel Nelson, and Rand was troubled to see that they were already aging him.

"Mason has been killed in Cairo," he told Rand, coming directly to the point. "I want you to go out there and take his place."

"Is it a job for Concealed Communications?" Rand asked.

"It might be and it might not be. But damn it, Rand, I don't have anyone else to send! Perhaps you can wrap it all up in forty-eight hours."

"You want me to find out who killed him?"

"That, of course. But more important, you're to contact someone known as the Scotsman. I gather he's quite a character around the city. Wears kilts and everything. Mason had some business with him which we must complete."

"All right," Rand sighed. "I'll go. You said it might be a job for Double-C. What did you mean?"

"Mason was stabbed to death in his hotel room. He seemed to be writing in a notebook at the time. This is what he wrote." He passed Rand a single sheet of loose-leaf notebook paper. Across it, near the top, had been printed in pencil the letters:

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JASOND

Rand studied it for a moment. "Jason D. The name of his killer?"

"Perhaps. But it could also be the name of a yacht, or stand for Jason five hundred—interpreting the D as a Roman numeral. I show it to you because it's the only clue we have to his death. You might keep an eye out for someone named Jason D."

"Did you check the files?"

"Nothing. It could be a new man, or a known agent using a new alias. Or, as I said, it could be merely the name of somebody's yacht."

"You're thinking of Jason and the Argonauts? The Golden Fleece?"

Hastings shrugged. "Someone might have decided it was a good name for a boat."

"If this was a dying message, wouldn't the killer have taken it away or destroyed it?"

"The stab wound was right to the heart. Mason didn't have time for any dying message. He wrote these letters before he was stabbed."

"Mason, Jason . . . Could it have been a variation of name that he was using himself?"

"If he was, it was completely unauthorized."

"What sort of man was he?" Rand asked. "I knew him only slightly."

"Good, plodding, a bit on the unimaginative side. The sort who gets himself killed by trusting too many people."

"How long had he been in Cairo?"

"He was assigned to the general area of the Middle East, but he had a girl friend in Cairo. He spent a lot of time there with her."

"Unmarried? Mason, I mean."

"Wife in Liverpool, but that didn't seem to bother him."

"What's the girl's name? In the event I need to look her up?"

"Forget the girl. It's the Scotsman you have to look up. You leave tomorrow."

"Very well," Rand agreed. There was no arguing with Hastings in one of his moods.

Cairo in June is a hot unpleasant city, with the temperature hovering in the mid-nineties and no chance of any rain to wash away the odors of the narrow streets and ancient buildings. In the old city especially, the sights and sounds and smells are of the past, of a time when a much simpler life existed in the city on the Nile.

Rand spent the first afternoon of his visit in Old Cairo, stopping at the Coptic Museum to see again the little pagan

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altars and shrines that had fascinated him on previous visits. Somehow the Coptic religion had always symbolized Cairo for him—evolving from paganism to Christianity just as the city itself had evolved from the veiled Orient to the bustle of modern life.

He was to meet the Scotsman after dinner at the Hotel Phoenix, not far from Cairo University and the Zoological Garden. Rand stopped there after eating, killing some time among the caged beasts, and then drove on to the hotel in his rented car.

The Scotsman, whose name was Kirkcaldy, was waiting for him in the cocktail lounge. He was easy enough to recognize, with his colorful kilt and large fur sporran hanging down the front. He rose, beaming and flush-faced, offering his hand. "You would be Mr. Rand."

"That's correct, Mr. Kirkcaldy."

"No one calls me that! I'm just the Scotsman around here—something of a local character, I suppose. But here—come up to my room. You'll be more comfortable there."

Rand followed him up the broad staircase to the second floor, watching the muscles of his legs beneath the plaid kilt. He noticed something else, too—a flat black knife tucked into the top of one of the Scotsman's stockings. "Don't you believe in elevators?"

"Stairs are good for the leg muscles. That's the trouble with London—too damn many lifts, no chance to walk upstairs."

He unlocked the door of his room and Rand followed him inside. "Is that knife you wear standard equipment?"

"This?" The Scotsman's hand moved with a blur that Rand couldn't follow. The knife hit the far wall and stuck there, vibrating.

"You're fast," Rand conceded.

"One has to be. We don't call it a knife, though. It's a skean dhu, a formal part of the Highland Scottish dress."

"You knew Mason?"

"Yes. He was killed with a knife, but not by me."

Rand cleared his throat. "What about a man named Jason D?"

The Scotsman sat down. "Never heard of him."

"There are a great many Russian technicians in Cairo these days."

"Yes."

"Could one of those be Jason D?"

"Perhaps. Anything is possible."

"Hastings, back in London, thinks Jason D might be the

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name of a yacht. The name Jason has certain maritime associations in legend."

The Scotsman frowned. "You're working for Hastings?"

"I work for myself. I didn't know you were acquainted with him."

"I'm not, but Mason mentioned the name. You're here to take Mason's place, get yourself killed as he did?" He rose and retrieved the knife from the wall.

"I'm in for forty-eight hours, and then out again. Mason was after some information. Now I want it."

The Scotsman sighed. "I only gave Mason a name, nothing more. He was to make contact with a man named Kharga, a minor official in el-Sadat's government."

"And the information he sought?"

"As you no doubt know—the next six months' delivery schedule of Russian planes to el-Sadat. With the power balance the way it is in the Middle East such information is invaluable. Israel would pay dearly for it, and the Americans would be anxious to obtain it as well. How will London use it?"

"I don't make policy, Kirkcaldy. You should know that. Just put me in touch with this man Kharga, and then I'll be on my way."

The Scotsman smiled. "You were asking about a yacht named the Jason D, or does that no longer interest you?"

"Is there one?"

"During World War Two a number of German spies, equipped with a radio transmitter, operated from a houseboat on the Nile. The Russians apparently liked the idea, and their chief security man in Cairo is now living on quite a luxurious houseboat. He keeps tabs on all the Russian technicians and their families who have come here recently. It is possible that he heard of Mason's activities."

"Does the houseboat have a name?"

"That I do not know. It could be the Jason D, or that could be its code name."

"Who is the security man?"

"His name is Lev Dontsova. He likes the good life, but that doesn't mean he's not dangerous."

"Thanks for the tip. What about Kharga?"

"Tomorrow. I'll get word to you where he'll be."

They shook hands and Rand left the Scotsman in his room.

His hotel was across the river from the Phoenix, and as he drove along El Tahrir Bridge toward the center of the city, he thought about the Scotsman

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and his knife. Kirkcaldy was not a paid agent of the British government. In fact, his status in the whole operation was somewhat vague. For himself, Rand always preferred to know which side men were on. Someone was paying the Scotsman, and he wondered who it was.

He opened the door to his room and instantly became aware that someone was inside. There was no time to draw a gun. He saw a figure move, silhouetted for a split second against the dull nighttime glow from the windows, and he leaped forward with a running tackle that carried them both to the floor.

The softness beneath him erupted almost at once into a girl's high-pitched scream. He covered her mouth with his hand and asked. "Just who in hell are you?"

"I—I wanted to see you," she gasped when he released her mouth. "I told the chambermaid I was your wife and she let me in."

He got up and turned on the light. She was a small dark-haired girl with the pleasing high-cheekboned features found so often in the Middle East. She might have been 25—no more than that, and probably less. "I'm too old to be tackling people in hotel rooms," he told her. "And I'm also too old to be your husband."

"But you are a friend of George Mason's?"

Mason. He remembered what Hastings had said about a girl friend in Cairo. "Yes, I'm a friend of Mason's," he answered, with less than complete honesty. He'd hardly known the man. "He spoke of having a girl here, but he never told me your name."

"Leila Gaad. I'm an archeologist, associated with Cairo University."

"How did you happen to meet Mason?"

"There was something in the newspaper about my swimming in the Nile and he sought me out. This was nearly a year ago. We've been friends ever since."

"Swimming in the Nile?"

"Skindiving, really. I have a theory that some small tombs from the First Dynasty might be submerged there, but they were only of wood in those days, and so far I've found nothing but some early artifacts. The water is so muddy it's very difficult to find anything down there."

"Mason was interested in archeology?"

"No, he was actually interested in a houseboat on the river. He wanted me to swim out and attach something to its side."

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Rand nodded. "A listening device of some sort. Did you do it?"

"Not at first, but—well, we became friendly over the months. Finally I did it for him, but the device never worked right. Just before he was killed he asked me to swim out and replace it."

"Did you do it?"

"I was going to, this week. And then he was killed. That's why I came here tonight, to see you. I have another boy friend who is terribly jealous, but if doing the job would somehow hurt the people who killed George I'll do it. We had a lot of good times together, and I owe him that much. They shouldn't have killed him, no matter what."

She spoke with a mixture of sincerity and detachment that surprised him. He doubted if she could really have been in love with Mason, and yet she seemed to have cared about him very much. "Do you have any idea what he was working on?"

She shook her head. "We rarely talked about his work. It might have been the men on the houseboat, but I don't know."

"Did he ever mention a man named Jason D?"

"No, I don't think so."

"How about the Scotsman?"

"No, but I saw him with a person wearing a kilt, just two nights before his death. It was his birthday, and we were going out to celebrate. I asked about the man, but George just said it was business. I was interested because my mother was Scotch. She married my father, an Egyptian, during the war."

"Was that the last time you saw Mason before his death?"

She nodded. "I gave him a birthday gift—a gold pencil with the University crest and a little engraved pyramid on it. The Archeology Department had some made up, and I use them as personal gifts to my friends. We had dinner and went back to his hotel room for a few drinks. I left sometime after midnight and that was the last time I saw him."

"He allowed you to go home alone after midnight?"

She blushed nicely. "Actually, it was closer to morning. The sun was rising."

"I see." He toyed with his room key, uncertain where to go from here. "Do you have the device Mason wanted attached to the houseboat?"

She nodded. "In my room."

If Mason really did have a method of eavesdropping on the occupants of the houseboat, Rand knew London would want him to follow through with it. In a sense, it might even fall within the province of Concealed Communications, es-

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pecially if he could listen in on radio messages to Moscow.

"Could we go down to the river tomorrow?" he asked, "and take a look at this houseboat?"

"Certainly. What time?"

He remembered the Scotsman. "Let me call you. I may have to meet someone first."

After she'd gone he sat for a long time by the window, looking out at the lights of Cairo by night. It may be as she said, that she only wanted to help get back at the people who had killed Mason. But he had learned long ago that hardly anything was what it seemed in this business.

The telephone next to Rand's bed rang sharply at seven a.m., waking him from a deep sleep. He rolled over and answered it. "Yes?"

A familiar voice came over the line. It was the Scotsman, but he didn't identify himself. "The person we spoke of will be at the Qait Bey Mosque exactly at noon. All right?"

"Fine," Rand said. "Thank you."

He had no idea where the Qait Bey Mosque was, and had to consult a guidebook. It was on the eastern edge of the city, quite close to the quarries, and seemed to be part of a cemetery. Rand had no picture of Kharga, and wondered how they would know each other.

He drove out to the Qait Bey Mosque just before noon, taking the highway which ran past the great sprawling Citadel. Behind him, and to his left, the familiar slender minarets stretched toward the sky, reminding him of Omar's *Rubaiyat* and all the wonders of the Middle East. He saw after a time that he was indeed entering a cemetery grounds, and that the mosque of Qait Bey was actually a tomb—a great domed structure of fantastic and intricate beauty.

Rand waited near the main entrance, studying an undulating arabesque design, until at last a short youthful Egyptian appeared from somewhere and touched his arm. "Mr. Rand?"

"Yes. You would be Kharga?"

"Would you accompany me while I walk about the grounds? The minaret here is especially restrained and subtle."

As they walked, Rand told the younger man, "I'm a friend of the Scotsman. And of George Mason."

"Alas, I was never destined to meet George Mason." He turned his handsome brown face toward the sky. "The Angel of Death met him first."

"He was to purchase some

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information from you."

The Egyptian nodded. "Numbers, only numbers."

There was no one near enough to overhear, and Rand said, "The delivery schedule of Russian planes to Egypt for the next six months."

"For a small additional sum I could also furnish the number of technicians expected to arrive from Moscow monthly during the remainder of this year."

"How much more?"

"The sum agreed upon for the plane schedule, plus an additional fifty percent. That would seem fair."

"It's a great deal of money."

The young man brushed the black hair from his eyes. "Mr. Rand, there is a great deal of risk. Sadat dismisses his generals when Israel triumphs on the battlefield. Some he even has shot. Can you imagine the fate of a poor clerk? I fear for my life every waking moment."

"Why do you do it then? Do you hate the Russians?"

He smiled. "No, only that I love money."

Rand sighed and handed him an envelope. "The rest when you give me the information. I would like to leave tomorrow, so it must be soon."

Kharga nodded. "In the morning. I will make a final check to see that the figures have not been changed."

"Where?"

"I will call your hotel. The Scotsman says the phones at your hotel are not tapped."

"Who pays the Scotsman? Whom does he work for?"

"That does not concern me. I do not know."

"Have you ever heard the name Jason D?"

"No," he replied, looking genuinely puzzled. "Is he here in Cairo?"

"I think so. I think he killed Mason." Rand watched a bird circling high above them. "I'd like to find him before I go home."

He phoned the number that Leila Gaad had given him and heard her soft voice answering. "Feel like a swim today?" he asked.

"It's you. The Englishman."

"That's right."

"It's getting late in the day."

"I thought toward evening might be the best time."

"My boy friend—"

"I know. He's jealous. I'll pick you up in twenty minutes."

She was silent a moment, considering. Then she said, "Very well. I'll get my gear ready."

He picked her up at an apartment near the American University, and they drove

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south along the Sayialet El Roda, a narrow arm of the Nile. Leila was dressed in shorts and a brief fringed yellow top that left her tanned midriff exposed. She was full of a youthful vigor that was always attractive to middle-aged men, and Rand had no difficulty in understanding Mason's having been attracted to her.

"Is that your skindiving gear in back?" he asked.

"That's it. I've become something of a familiar figure down this way, so my antics don't attract much attention any more. The device George gave me is in this box."

When they finally came to a stop, a few miles south of Old Cairo, he opened the box and took it out. A listening device with short-range radio transmitter—and the whole thing magnetized to stick to a ship's hull. It was well-made and expensive, and Rand doubted if British Intelligence was supplying them as standard equipment. He turned it over and noted that it had been manufactured in the United States.

"Will you turn your back while I climb into my gear?" she asked.

"Is this the place?"

"We're opposite the Pyramids of Zawiet el Aryan. According to my studies, this is the least likely place for any submerged tombs to be located."

"But then why are you—?"

"Because this is where the houseboat is, foolish!"

He looked out then at the muddy Nile waters and saw a large squarish shape glistening in the afternoon sun. He whistled softly and simply stared at it. "That's quite a boat! The Russians aren't hurting for money."

"Lev Dontsova likes the good life, but that doesn't mean he's not dangerous," she said.

Rand looked back at her. The words had an oddly familiar ring, as if she were quoting someone. "Who told you that? Mason?"

"Yes, that's what he said."

"Someone else said it, too. Just yesterday." Something was wrong here, and he was trying to put his finger on it. "How did you know I was in Cairo, at that hotel last night? How did you know I was a friend of Mason's?"

"I—" The line of her mouth hardened. "If you want me to swim out there, I'd better get started. It will be getting dark soon."

"Go ahead." He wondered if the whole business was a mistake, if he wouldn't have been better off sticking to his transaction with Kharga instead

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of involving himself with this girl and the Russian houseboat.

In another two minutes she was ready, and she stepped from behind the car wearing a two-piece black bathing suit that showed off her young body well. She had a diver's knife belted to one tanned thigh, and wore an air tank with twin breathing hoses on her back. She took the listening device from him and waved one arm. "Wish me luck," she said, adjusting her eyepiece. Then she was gone, arching her body into a perfect dive off the river bank.

Rand watched her for a moment, until she disappeared beneath the muddy waters and was lost from view. He marveled that she could find her way beneath that opaque surface, but he knew she was down there, somewhere, and he hoped the people on the houseboat hadn't seen her go in.

The hot June sun was almost to the horizon, and he knew it must be late. He checked his watch and saw they still had another hour before darkness. They had parked on the western bank of the river, to have the setting sun at their backs, and while this might have helped shield their activities it also reflected off the houseboat windows, making Rand's own observations difficult.

He sat in the car and smoked one of his American cigarettes, watching the minutes pass by on his watch. She was taking too long, and that worried him. Still, there seemed to be no sign of activity or alarm aboard the houseboat. A few cars passed on the highway, and the sun dipped a little farther, until its lower edge was actually touching the horizon.

A big foreign automobile rolled off the highway and came to a stop behind his car. Rand turned and started to go out to meet the newcomer, but he wasn't fast enough. It was a bulky Russian with a gun, and he had the gun pointed at Rand's stomach.

"American?"

"British," Rand corrected, trying to smile.

"We go." He motioned toward the river, and Rand saw that the houseboat was moving in to pick them up.

Lev Dontsova was a slim long-haired man with sharp features and a general appearance somewhat like the old magazine illustrations of Sherlock Holmes. He even wore a satin smoking jacket as he stood up to greet Rand's arrival. The houseboat had anchored close enough to the river bank for a

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gangplank to reach across the water, and Rand had walked on with the gunman right behind him.

"I really must protest this outrage," he told Dontsova. Leila stood to one side, dripping wet, her hands tied behind her back. But she seemed to be uninjured, and once they had tied her hands they hadn't bothered to remove the knife from its sheath on her thigh.

"We are the outraged ones!" the Russian stormed in passable English. "This girl tries to put a bomb on our boat!"

Rand sucked in his breath. "You know damn well it's not a bomb." He turned to Leila. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, I guess so."

"How did they spot you?"

"They came off on the side opposite you, two of them, and grabbed me in the water. Then this man radioed to shore and had you picked up, too."

"A bomb," Dontsova repeated. "Our friends the Egyptians pass out long prison sentences for such acts."

"It's a radio transmitter and you know it. You probably have a detection device aboard that spotted it when she swam close enough."

"Then you are spies, not assassins?" He allowed his lips to twist into the hint of a grin.

"We are archeologists," Rand insisted. "She was diving for a lost tomb."

"A pretty mermaid like this? Looking for a lost tomb? I doubt that."

"All right," Rand said, taking a wild chance. "We were sent by Jason D."

The Russian looked blank. "Jason D? Who is this? Another Englishman?"

Rand moved over to the girl's side. "If you don't know that name, you surely must know Taz, one of your top intelligence experts." Rand had met Taz on three occasions, most recently in Moscow, and they were friendly enemies, respectful of each other's abilities.

"I know Taz."

"Then you know enough not to harm us."

"Spies take a certain risk. They know what to expect."

"Like Mason? Did you kill him?"

"The Englishman? No, no! We are here not to kill, but only to aid the defense of the United Arab Republic."

Rand had maneuvered into the position he wanted. His right hand dropped fast, hitting Leila's bare thigh and yanking her knife free of its sheath. Then he whirled, bringing the blade up fast, and struck at the man with the pistol. He caught

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him in the wrist and the gun flew out of his hand. Dontsova shouted something in Russian, but already Rand was behind the wounded man, catching him around the neck with one arm while he held the knife ready with the other.

The door of the cabin burst open and a burly man in swimming trunks came running in response to Dontsova's shouts. They stood eyeing each other for an instant, while the bleeding man struggled in Rand's grasp. "I'll kill him," Rand warned.

Dontsova sighed and held up his hands. "What is it you want?"

"Untie the girl and let us leave."

The Russian shrugged. "We meant no harm. You, after all, were the one who came to cause trouble." He walked over and untied Leila, then stepped back. "Go on, go! You are both free!"

"Pick up the gun," Rand told the girl. When she had done it he released the wounded man and moved backward toward the door.

"Perhaps we will meet again," Dontsova said with a smile.

"Maybe," Rand agreed. Then they were on the deck and he slammed the door behind them. They ran across the gangplank and up the river bank to the car, but no one followed. The Russians had apparently finished their activities for the day.

Back at her apartment, Leila Gaad gave him a fleeting kiss on the cheek. "I can't thank you enough," she said.

"I did get you into it, after all. The least I could do was get you out again."

"I wasn't fast enough in the water. I should have used my knife on him."

He thought of George Mason, dead from a stabbing. "There are too many knives in this affair already."

"You asked me a question earlier. You asked me how I knew you were in Cairo, and a friend of George's. I can tell you now."

"You don't have to," Rand told her. "I know." He left her standing there and went back to his car.

Kharga phoned again in the morning, quite early. Rand listened to his voice on the phone and suggested, "Couldn't you just read the numbers to me?"

Kharga coughed at the other end. "You still have another envelope for me."

"I was forgetting. Where will I meet you? I want to be on an afternoon plane to London."

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"At the eastern end of El Tahrir Bridge there are a pair of stone lions. I will be at the north lion, nearest to the Nile Hilton Hotel, at noon."

"Very well." Rand hung up and dressed quickly. He had one more person to see before he finished his work at noon.

The Scotsman stood up to greet Rand, holding out a hand. "I'm glad we could meet again before you left Cairo," he said. "Was your mission successful?"

"Very successful," Rand said. "I'm meeting Kharga at noon to get the information."

"I understand there was some trouble last evening aboard the Russian houseboat."

"News travels fast. There was some trouble, but nothing I couldn't handle."

"Lev Dontsova is very angry. Good thing you're leaving today."

"Before I left I hoped to wrap up the Mason killing."

"You know who did it?"

Rand looked the Scotsman in the eye. "You killed him, Kirkcaldy. You've been running agents for the Americans. It was an American plan to attach that listening device to the houseboat, and you were using Mason to get to the girl. You needed her for the dirty work."

"Oh, come now, Rand! Isn't that rather far-fetched?"

"And you're carrying the murder knife with you right now, in your stocking top," Rand went on smoothly. "The girl could only have known of my arrival if you told her, and she used the same words to describe Dontsova that you had used earlier to me."

"You've been too long in the sun, Rand."

"Do you deny that the Americans pay you? The device was made in America."

The Scotsman sighed and began pacing. "Damn you, Rand! You make a fellow's job extremely difficult. Yes, the Americans do pay me, and yes, I was running Mason as an agent. He'd been in the Middle East a long time and had acquired some expensive girl friends—Leila Gaad in Cairo, and another in Baghdad. So he took money from your people and from the Americans, too. The Americans didn't mind, since it was all the same side, but I don't think London knew. Mason was intent on getting the figures from Kharga, but I was after a longer-range operation. I figured Mason's girl could swim out to the houseboat—"

"She did, twice. But it wasn't that easy. Why did you kill Mason?"

"I didn't, damn you!"

"I think your code name is Jason D."

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"I never heard of Jason D until you first mentioned it to me."

"Leila mentioned a jealous boy friend. That could be you—and you could have killed Mason in a fight over her."

The Scotsman chuckled. "Now, now, old fellow. You can't have it both ways. If I were Leila's lover I wouldn't have needed Mason to make contact with her, would I?"

Rand hesitated, uncertain. "The knife—"

"The knife I carry is for throwing. Mason was stabbed with a direct thrust, from quite close up. The wound went directly to the heart, remember, which means it had to go up from under the ribs."

"But—"

"Why not ask the girl about it? She's quite good with a knife."

"You know a lot."

"More than you when it comes to Cairo, old boy. Go back to London where you belong."

Rand had a great deal more to say, but there seemed no point to it then. The Scotsman had beaten him, at least for the present. Besides, it was almost time for his noon meeting.

He parked the rented car at the Nile Hilton and hurried across the street to the wide shaded walk that ran along the river. The bridge of El Tahrir was straight ahead, so close to the water that passing boats had to lower their masts to go under. The water was just as muddy here, but calm and majestic somehow. This was really the Nile, in all its grandeur.

The lion he sought was on its perch, silent in stone, and the short young Egyptian was waiting at its base. "Sorry I'm late," Rand said. "There was some unfinished business."

Kharga nodded. "You have the other envelope?"

Rand handed it over and asked, "You have the figures?"

"In my mind. Write them down as I talk." Kharga was speaking fast, keeping an eye on the bridge approaches. "In July the Russians will deliver fifteen planes. In August—"

Then Rand saw her, waiting in a little car near the bridge. Leila Gaad. For a moment he thought she was waiting for him, but then in an instant he knew the truth. "Jason D," he said, interrupting.

"What?" The small man stared at him.

"Jason D. It was you all along. You're Leila's lover, Kharga. You killed George Mason."

The Egyptian blinked his eyes and looked around, seek-

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ing escape. He pushed out with his hands and caught Rand off balance, sending him toppling backward. Then he was running up the short flight of stone steps to the street and the waiting car.

Rand recovered quickly and sprinted after him. For an instant he thought he would overtake him, but Kharga turned at the top of the steps, his back against the lion, and drew a short deadly dagger. Rand saw it coming, flashing in the noonday sun, too late to draw his gun. From the car Leila saw it happening too and screamed.

Then a black-hilted knife thudded into the Egyptian's chest. He stiffened, a look of shock and surprise spreading on his face, and fell forward.

The Scotsman came up the steps behind Rand. "Lucky thing I followed you. Didn't I tell you my knives were for throwing?"

An hour later, in the emergency waiting room at Cairo University Hospital, Rand faced the Scotsman and Leila. Her face was tear-stained, and she was close to hysterics. "I don't care," she mumbled. "I won't believe he killed George. Not over me."

"I'm afraid it was just that," Rand told her. "With all the spies and intrigue around it was only a love triangle that caused his death. I knew as soon as I saw you waiting for Kharga, and realized he was your jealous boy friend. You told me you'd given Mason a birthday gift—a gold pencil with a crest and pyramid that you used for personal gifts. I suppose you'd given Kharga one too, and he recognized it in Mason's hand. Of course we already knew that Mason was writing with a pencil just before he was stabbed, and it seemed logical that he'd be using his new birthday gift. Maybe Kharga asked where he'd gotten it, or maybe he knew already. Anyway, he was just as jealous as you said. He must have suspected another lover for a long time, and here he was, suddenly face to face with the man in a hotel room. He took out his dagger and stabbed Mason, poor chap."

"He claimed Mason never made contact with him," the Scotsman insisted.

"I know. That's where Jason D comes in." Rand took out the carefully folded piece of notebook paper. "You see, Mason's penciled message never did say Jason D. Rather, it consisted of the letters JASOND, spaced equally across the top of the page. He was writing it as he faced his murderer, as he waited for

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Kharga to give him the figures on Russian planes and technicians for Egypt during the next six months."

They looked blank.

"But don't you see?" Rand asked. "JASOND—Mason's quick and simple abbreviations for July, August, September, October, November, December. He wouldn't have written those letters if he wasn't in the very act of receiving the information from Kharga when he died. And since Kharga denied even seeing him, that made Kharga the murderer."

Leila shook her head, but now in despair rather than disbelief. "And all because he recognized the pencil," she said softly. "What do the doctors say? Will he live?"

Rand and the Scotsman exchanged glances, and he said, "I'm afraid there's not much hope. And unfortunately I never did get the information I needed from him."

But now it was the Scotsman's turn to smile. "I just might be able to help you there, Rand. There is a cook on Dontsova's houseboat who has recently proved to be most cooperative . . ."

NEXT MONTH . . .

ALL-NEW Issue

13 *new* short stories and novelets by

MICHAEL GILBERT

H. R. F. KEATING

EDWARD D. HOCH

and Part Three (a complete story) of

Mr. X's *The Will-o'-the-Wisp Mystery*

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a *NEW* Mr. Strang story by

WILLIAM BRITTAIN

We've missed Mr. Leonard Strang, the gnomelike little science teacher of Aldershot High School, who dabbles in detection—this is his first new adventure in EQMM in more than a year . . . Just as series thieves, going as far back as Maurice Leblanc's immortal Arsene Lupin, have sooner or later switched from thieving to detecting, so Mr. Strang now switches roles—in reverse—from sleuthing to shoplifting. But the challenge to his ingenuity and resourcefulness is in no way diminished—indeed, in some ways, the test is even more rigorous . . .

MR. STRANG LIFTS A GLASS

by WILLIAM BRITTAIN

"MR. BUTCHER WILL see you now."

The secretary smiled and pointed to a door at the opposite end of the outer office. Mr. Strang and the two students from the junior class of Aldershot High School nodded their thanks and padded across the thick carpet. When they reached the door which led to the sanctum sanctorum of the president of Butcher's Department Store (Aldershot's Biggest and Best), the students wriggled apprehensively, and Mr. Strang gave them a wink of reassurance. He wished he felt as certain of success as he tried to appear.

Henry Kerrigan, whose long dark hair and full-sleeved shirt gave him a curious resemblance to Romeo Montague, turned to the girl beside him and crossed his fingers for luck. The girl, Jean Dumont, wore a blue dress short enough to have got her arrested when Mr. Strang was a boy. Nevertheless, it had been his idea that she wear it. Perhaps if all else failed, Wade Butcher could be influenced by the sight of a trim feminine figure.

Taking the stubby briar pipe from between his teeth, Mr. Strang used it to tap gently on

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the door. "Come in," rumbled a voice from inside.

The door opened quietly as Mr. Strang pushed at it, and when they had entered it closed again with a respectful hushing sound. The office, with its modern furniture, modernistic statuary, and civic-award plaques on the walls, was clearly designed to awe any visitor and convince him that this was indeed the sanctum sanctorum of a Successful Executive.

In one corner a big bulky man wearing a cashmere sports jacket had his back to them and was fiddling with the dials on one of the two television sets on a stainless steel table. He switched the set off and turned around. Wade Butcher had a face that was still handsome in spite of a double chin and a receding hairline. Its appearance was only slightly marred by a nose that had once been broken.

"Leonard Strang!" He walked toward the small slender science teacher with his right hand extended, and Mr. Strang allowed his own hand to be enveloped in Butcher's huge paw. The students were introduced, and Butcher gestured toward seats in front of his huge desk. He then moved behind the desk and settled himself into a padded chair.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Strang?" he asked, taking a thick cigar from a large teakwood box and sparking fire from a gold lighter.

"We need money, Wade—the school, that is." Mr. Strang ran a hand nervously across his wrinkled brow. He didn't like doing this; it seemed undignified somehow.

"Oh? Usually my secretary handles things like that. But I'm glad you dropped in, for old times' sake. How much? Ten dollars? Twenty-five?"

Henry and Jean looked at each other, and Mr. Strang took a deep breath. "We need a thousand dollars," he answered slowly.

Butcher stared at the teacher in silence. Then, slowly, his huge body began to shake with laughter. "You're joking!" he burst out.

"Wade, let me explain. Don't just turn us down flat." Mr. Strang spoke rapidly, giving Butcher no time to voice his refusal. "We're trying to get a student-exchange program going. Next year there'll be a chance for Henry and Jean to study in France. But somehow we've got to raise the money to send them there. We've tried shows and sales at the school, and we've asked for contributions from the community. We've made quite a bit, but

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we're still twelve hundred dollars short. If you could give us a thousand I'm sure we could raise the additional two hundred. Think of it as an opportunity for you to—"

"It's not an opportunity you're offering me." Butcher shook his head ponderously from side to side. "It's a touch—and a hefty one."

"But the good will it can mean to the store—"

"Good will? I'm more interested in profits."

"But I'm sure that for something as worthwhile as this the store can afford to—"

"Dammit, Strang, it's not the store. It's me. I'm the one who's turning you down."

Both men stopped abruptly. There was a silence in the office that could almost be touched. "Did you think I'd forgotten, Mr. Strang?" asked Butcher softly. "Not me. Not even after all these years. I knew that some day—sometime—you'd have to come to me. I guess the time is now."

"What does he mean, Mr. Strang?" asked Jean, puzzled. The old science teacher looked at Wade Butcher, who shrugged and turned to stare out the window behind him.

"I don't want to drag you into something personal between Mr. Butcher and me," Mr. Strang began, "especially since it happened so long ago. But he brought it up, so perhaps you'd better know.

"It was back towards the end of the Depression—in 1937, I believe. Wade—Mr. Butcher—was a student in my general science class at Aldershot High. Most of the families in town had little or no money, and several of my students came to school without bringing lunch or even being able to buy food. Wade always had cash in his pocket. His father owned a small dry-goods store and had managed to keep his head above water. Wade began to lend money for lunches. I thought it was a fine thing for him to do—at first."

"It sure was," said Jean. "But why—"

"Later on I found out that Wade was charging interest," Mr. Strang continued. "Six percent per week. Some of the students eventually owed tremendous amounts in interest alone."

"There was nothing illegal about it," interrupted Butcher aggressively. "Everybody I loaned money to knew the kind of deal I was making. None of them complained—at least, not until it was time to pay me back."

"But if they were broke to begin with," asked Jean, "how did they ever—"

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"Mr. Strang gave them the money!" Butcher whirled in his chair. "Gave it to 'em! They paid me back, all right, and in more than money. As soon as they got out of debt they ganged up on me one day after school. That's how I got this." He fingered his broken nose.

"When it happened, Wade, I told you how sorry I was. But that doesn't alter the fact that you were taking advantage of others just because you had cash and they didn't."

"Like I said, they went into the deals with their eyes wide-open. I never welched on any of my deals, did I?"

Mr. Strang had to admit this was true. Wade had always had a compulsion to follow any agreement to the letter. He could be as exacting on himself as he was on others. One time he'd completed three weeks of homework by remaining up all night, simply because he'd promised it to Mr. Strang in the morning. His personal motto might have been: "Absolute justice—without mercy."

Although $1000 was a pittance compared to the wealth of Butcher's Department Store, Mr. Strang knew there was no hope. He was being punished, according to Butcher's stern code, for a supposed injustice committed more than thirty years before.

He got up to leave.

"Mr. Butcher," said Henry, still in his chair. "You stink. Even if your nose was Mr. Strang's fault—and I think you had it coming—why take it out on us? Personally I think you're just cheap, and the excuse about your nose is just a cop out. You'll spend money on toys like those two TV sets, but you won't give anything to our exchange program."

"Toys?" Butcher grinned, got up, and walked to one of the sets. "Not quite." He turned the set on, and a view of the store's Perfume Department appeared on the screen. "The store used to lose a couple of hundred dollars every day because of shoplifting and employee pilfering until I had this closed-circuit system installed," he said. He flipped the channel selector knob. Lingerie—Housewares—Men's Clothing. There was no part of the store that was hidden from Butcher's view.

"The other set is for the second floor." Butcher clicked the switch off. "We catch thirty or forty people a day with this rig. The sets in the Security Office are manned at all times when the store's open, and we make no secret of the fact that shoppers are under constant observation. Shoplifting has been cut to almost nothing."

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"What happens when you see somebody taking something?" asked Jean. "Do you arrest them?"

"No. One of my men follows them outside. It's not technically shoplifting unless the merchandise is out of the store. Then the shopper is brought in to the Chief of Security, Max Whittier."

"Then you arrest them?"

"We just make them pay for the merchandise. Occasionally we release the details to the newspapers—we find it warns off others who might be tempted."

"How much does a rig like this cost, Mr. Butcher?" asked Henry.

"About seven thousand dollars. And worth every penny of it."

Anger or frustration might have accounted for Henry's next remark. But afterward, Mr. Strang was willing to swear that the boy knew exactly what he was doing—that when it came to a thousand dollars a high-school student could be just as ruthless as the president of a large store.

"Gee, Mr. Butcher," Henry said slowly. "I don't see how those dumb TV sets could stop anybody with a brain in his head. Why I bet Mr. Strang could outwit them easy."

"Well, I've heard Mr. Strang has occasionally been something of an amateur detective, but I doubt that he—" Butcher suddenly faced the teacher and smiled oddly. "But maybe you've got something there," he continued more slowly. "How about it, Mr. Strang?"

"How about what?"

"Like to try your hand at being a thief?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I'll make a deal with you. If you can lift something from the store—something I pick out—and get it outside without being caught, I'll give you the thousand dollars your project needs."

Mr. Strang began a vehement refusal. It was not only undignified but possibly illegal, even though Butcher himself would be in on the scheme. No, the whole idea was impossible. There was only one sensible answer.

And then he glanced at Henry and Jean. Their eyes had the pleading look of puppies waiting to be fed.

"Well—uh—" Mr. Strang stared daggers at his two students. "What happens if I get caught?"

"Oh, I'll promise you won't go to jail, Mr. Strang. But not until the papers have a field day. It would be pretty embarrassing to you, especially since you'd probably have to

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answer to the School Board for your actions." Again Butcher rubbed his broken nose.

"I see. This would be your revenge, is that it?"

"That's right. Unless you succeed, of course. They seem to have a lot of faith in you." He gestured toward Henry and Jean.

Mr. Strang considered the challenge for a long minute. "What am I supposed to steal?" he asked. "I'm too old to be lifting a rowboat or a bedroom set."

"I've been thinking about that," said Butcher, "and I believe I've got the very thing." He pointed to the door. "Shall we go?"

Five minutes later Mr. Strang and Wade Butcher were standing in front of a wide shelf in the Gift Department on the first floor of the store. Butcher pointed to an object on the shelf. "That's it, Mr. Strang," he said. "That's what you've got to steal."

Mr. Strang scowled angrily. "Arthropoda!" he growled.

"What's the matter? Don't you think you're clever enough to get out of here with a single glass?"

Certainly the object had the shape of a glass—a shot glass used for mixing drinks, to be exact. It was the size of the thing that confounded the teacher. More than a foot high and just as wide, the glass seemed to have developed its own kind of pituitary trouble and grown to gigantic dimensions. It was the ugliest thing Mr. Strang had ever laid eyes on, and he couldn't understand how anyone had the nerve to charge $7 for it.

"It's supposed to be used as a punchbowl," Butcher explained. "So that's the deal. Get that glass out of the store, and the thousand dollars is yours—the school's, that is. Care to come back to the office and discuss it further?"

"I'll come back," Mr. Strang replied, "if only to wring the necks of those two kids up there."

Seated behind his desk once more, Butcher turned to Henry and Jean. "Mr. Strang's decided to accept my challenge," he said. "And I tell you frankly, I don't think he's got one chance in a million of succeeding. Please don't expect me to be sympathetic when he fails. You'll get no thousand dollars, but I'll get plenty of laughs. That I promise."

"Just to get the ground rules straight," said Mr. Strang, "what about help? Can I have any assistance?"

Butcher thought about this. "I don't see why not," he said, "as long as you don't use a

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professional shoplifter. Aside from that, use anybody or anything you like. Try black magic, for all I care. But when you—or your helper—is nabbed, you've got to agree to any publicity I want to get about how you failed."

"*If* I fail," said the teacher. "But to get all things in proper form, just tell me once more—what are the exact terms of the agreement?" He took a small notebook from his jacket pocket.

Butcher glanced at the notebook and pulled his desk pad toward him. He snatched up a pen and began to write.

"You select any day the store is open," he began slowly, spacing his words to give both of them time to write the terms down. "On that day you've got to get the glass out of the store without being caught." He folded the paper and put it in his pocket. "Simple enough?"

"Simple enough," Mr. Strang repeated.

But the following afternoon, as he sat perched on the demonstration table of his classroom in front of Henry Kerrigan and Jean Dumont, it didn't seem at all simple.

"There must be *some* way, Mr. Strang," said Jean, slouching at her desk and resting her head on one hand. "I read somewhere about a person who once shoplifted a piano. And there was a woman who almost got out of a store in New York with a TV set between her legs."

"I'll bet the woman's skirt was longer than yours," said Mr. Strang with a puckish grin. "And as for the piano, that was arranged by altering a sales slip. The store itself delivered it."

"Then why couldn't we—"

"Wade Butcher is no fool," Mr. Strang reminded them. "He picked what he wanted me to steal very carefully. That big bowl—the shot glass—probably wouldn't be delivered. It's not quite expensive enough, and the box it comes in probably has carrying handles. On the other hand it's too bulky to hide under clothing, and of course it's rigid so it can't be folded up or anything like that. Besides, Mr. Butcher will have one of his men watching that part of the store on his closed-circuit TV, just waiting for me to try something."

"Couldn't one of us take it?" asked Henry, indicating himself and Jean.

"No. Definitely not."

"But he said you could have help."

"I know. But I'm not getting either of you into trouble because of an idiotic bet between Mr. Butcher and me. I'm the one he wants to get. I

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can see the newspaper headline now: Teacher Nabbed As Shoplifter. Oh . . . Mollusca!"

Mr. Strang spent the entire weekend in a futile attempt to develop a foolproof technique for getting the huge shot glass out of Butcher's Department Store. By Monday noon he was about ready to admit defeat. Only the thought of Wade Butcher's smile of triumph—plus the loss of the all-important $1000—prevented him from doing it.

"For a full-time teacher and occasional detective, Leonard," he mumbled to himself as he stood by a small sink polishing test tubes for use in his afternoon chemistry classes, "you certainly make an inept thief." He considered again the conditions under which he was obliged to operate: On that day you've got to get the glass out of the store without being caught. It was so simple. Too simple. There didn't seem to be a single loophole. He put the cleaned tubes in their racks and headed toward the cafeteria and lunch.

Halfway through his meal he paused and noticed the garbage cans at the end of the teachers' dining room into which leftover food and used paper napkins were dropped. Idly he ran his fork through the gelatinous mass which the chef, with more audacity than culinary art, had labeled chow mein. He jammed the fork into the top of the pile of rice and vegetables so that it stuck up like a miniature flagpole. Then he rose suddenly from his chair.

"I've got it!" he cried out. "Eureka!"

And leaving his colleagues to ponder this Archimedian comment he left the room and walked quickly to the telephone booth on the first floor. After a call to the Aldershot village building, he dialed Wade Butcher's number.

It took almost two minutes to convince Butcher's secretary that he must speak to the president personally and that it would be impossible to leave a message. Finally, Butcher came on the line.

"Wade, this is Mr. Strang."

"Want to call it off?" asked Butcher gleefully.

"No. But keep a sharp lookout for me on Thursday. I'll be in after school to filch your oversized shot glass." And deliberately chuckling like The Shadow he remembered from old radio days, Mr. Strang hung up the receiver.

Butcher's Department Store was open until nine o'clock on Thursday and Friday evenings. So when Mr. Strang arrived shortly after 5:00 he knew he

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would be a marked man for nearly four hours.

The moment after he entered the store, the telephone in Wade Butcher's office rang. "Yeah?" Butcher barked.

"Security," said the voice at the other end of the line. "That Strang character is here. The camera picked him up just as soon as he walked in the door."

"Okay. Keep him in sight as long as he's here and be sure to put the whole thing on tape. I may want to run parts of it on a late-news program sometime."

"Right, Mr. Butcher. And I've got one of my men on the floor, watching that big glass full-time, just like you ordered."

"Good. Max. Don't let Strang or the glass out of your sight."

Mr. Strang seemed in no hurry to get anywhere near the glass. He took the escalator to the second floor and spent almost an hour thumbing through science volumes in the Book Department. Occasionally he glanced around to smile at the TV camera mounted in the ceiling.

At 5:30 Henry Kerrigan and Jean Dumont came into the store. Henry wore thick boots, a leather jacket with several zippered pockets, dark glasses, and a beret. Jean had on a bright-red maxicoat. They would have stood out at a masquerade party to say nothing of a crowd of late-afternoon shoppers. It was Butcher himself who spotted them on the TV in his office after they had been in the store more than twenty minutes. He picked up the telephone and stabbed a button angrily.

"Max," he growled, "get a couple of your guys down on the floor to keep their eyes on those two kids. Yeah, the ones in Hardware. Leather jacket and long coat—that's them. You stay at the set and keep watching Mr. Strang."

Five minutes later, Henry and Jean caught sight of the two men from Security. "The big one should get his suit pressed," said Jean, laughing. "Let's split up and see what they do."

She left Henry in rapt contemplation of "antique" door hinges and made her way to Women's Wear. There she picked up the frilliest slip she could find and requested a fitting room where she could try it on. The man following her was angrily stopped at the door to the fitting room by an outraged saleslady.

The shot glass was still on its shelf.

Mr. Strang headed for the lunch counter where he ordered a fried-egg sandwich and a cup

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of coffee. Half an hour later, Henry found him, sat on the next stool, and ordered a hamburger. While he waited, Henry waved cheerfully at the camera above his head.

"Those damn fools are treating this like it's a game," Butcher said to himself as he watched Mr. Strang and Henry playing tick-tack-toe on a napkin. "When are they going after the glass?" He switched the channel selector.

All was well with the huge shot glass in the Gift Department.

At seven o'clock Mr. Strang and Henry headed for the Toy and Games Department where they spent half an hour playing chess. By this time Butcher had joined Max Whittier in the Security Office. They both peered at the TV screen. "I just heard from Gould," said Max. "The girl finally came out of the dressing room. Look, there she is now."

On the screen Jean moved into view, picked up all the chessmen, and packed them neatly in their box. Then she, Henry, and Mr. Strang turned toward the TV camera and bowed deeply.

"Hell," said Max. "They must think they're on the Ed Sullivan Show."

It wasn't until eight o'clock that the "show's" interest began to pick up. The three potential shoplifters finally headed toward the Gift Department. Butcher saw Mr. Strang stop to shake hands with the Security man assigned to watch the big glass. Then, with elaborate care, the teacher went to the shelf and took the huge thing in his hands.

"Max, he's got it!" said Butcher. "Get down on the main floor, right now!"

"You want me to pick him up?" asked Max.

"No, there's nothing we can do until he gets it outside. Just keep an eye on him—on all three of 'em."

Max hurried out of the room, and Butcher turned back to the screen. He was just in time to see Mr. Strang hand the glass to Jean. She moved her arm quickly, and her maxicoat billowed out. Suddenly the glass was no longer visible. She headed toward the front of the building as Henry walked quickly away to the rear and Mr. Strang ambled off toward the escalator.

"Max!" screamed Butcher uselessly. "Get her—I mean him. Damn it, they're getting away."

But Max and the man guarding the glass were on their toes. One took Jean's arm just after she walked through the store's front door and the other

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nabbed Henry at the rear. They were both brought in range of the TV camera. After a quick search Max telephoned Butcher.

"They're both clean, Mr. Butcher," he said. "Neither one's got the glass."

But in the confusion Mr. Strang had disappeared. Desperately Butcher flipped through the channels on both sets. Home Appliances—Power Tools—Stationery—Books.

Mr. Strang was finally found lurking—if so harmless and inconspicuous a man can be said to lurk—on the second floor, in Sporting Goods. And he had the glass tucked under his arm like a transparent football.

He wiggled his fingers slyly at the camera, and Butcher switched channels as the teacher scuttled into the Men's Wear Department. From there Strang went to the escalator and rode down, holding the glass triumphantly above his head until Max, still on the first floor with Jean and Henry, saw him.

The chase that followed would have done credit to the Keystone Cops. Mr. Strang did some fancy broken-field running through the aisles on the main floor, closely followed by Max and the other Security officer, neither of whom knew what he would do with the teacher if he caught him. In the Curtains and Draperies Department they lost him for a few moments until Strang stuck his head through a fake window hung with elaborate drapes and shouted at them. At the lunch counter Strang sat down, and when they sat beside him, he ordered each of them a cup of coffee and then moved on just as they were getting ready to relax for a few moments and drink it.

At 8:45, a quarter of an hour before closing time, Max began to see a pattern in Mr. Strang's movements. After trying three ballpoint pens in Stationery, Mr. Strang insisted that his followers do the same. At the electric-razor counter the teacher treated himself to a free shave. In the clock section he started four alarm clocks buzzing at the same time before the salesman stopped him.

And as the minutes passed, Mr. Strang, with the huge glass under his arm, was getting nearer and nearer to the store's big front doors.

Butcher watched the teacher move onto the marble floor just inside the entrance doors. Shoppers leaving the building stared at the man with the glass curiously.

And then a loud feminine voice boomed out over the store's public-address system: "Ten minutes to closing time!

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Shoppers will have ten minutes to complete their business. The store closes at nine o'clock."

Butcher wondered if it was the announcement that startled Mr. Strang; perhaps the smooth glass just squirted out of fingers now slippery with perspiration. For whatever reason the teacher made a convulsive gesture, tripped, and the glass shot out of his hands like something alive. It arched through the air and struck hard against the unyielding floor.

It shattered into dozens of jagged pieces.

At the same time on the TV screen, Butcher saw Mr. Strang fall to his knees, a pained expression on his face. "All I need right now is to have him collapse in the store," Butcher moaned.

On the store's main floor Max Whittier moved to grab Mr. Strang under one arm and lead him to the president's office. At the same time the other Security guard signaled to a cleaning man who began to sweep up the shards of glass.

"You seem to be feeling better, Mr. Strang." Wade Butcher lounged back in his chair, a satisfied smile on his lips. "I hope the ankle isn't too painful."

"No, I just turned it slightly," was the reply. "I'll be fine."

"You failed, you know. The store's officially closed now, and you didn't make it. Of course there was no possibility of arrest, but some of that TV tape I have of you will make interesting viewing."

Mr. Strang didn't answer. "May I go home now?" he asked finally. "It's been a hard day."

Butcher shrugged. "Why not? Max, see if you can locate Mr. Strang's car in the parking lot. Bring it around to the main entrance. I'll escort him out personally."

It was almost midnight when Wade Butcher arrived home. He was later than usual because he and Max Whittier had run parts of the tape which showed Mr. Strang dashing around the store. He was still chuckling when he came into the living room.

He opened a drawer in the towering breakfront and took out a sheet of paper. He had a letter to write—a long sarcastic letter to a gnomelike little teacher whom he'd sent scuttling from one end of his store to the other in a futile attempt to—

Butcher crumpled the paper and got another sheet. Somehow the spiteful words weren't coming as easily as he'd expected. He started the letter four times, and each time he

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got no further than "My dear Mr. Strang."

Hell, he'd be better off writing it in the morning when his mind was fresh. But at least the scrawny old buzzard hadn't got the $1000 he was after.

"Wade?" Butcher looked up from the sheet of paper. His wife Helen was standing at the foot of the stairs rubbing her eyes sleepily.

"Yes, dear? Why aren't you asleep?"

"I just wanted to tell you to be sure and put out the trash before you come up. The yard man forgot to do it today, and the truck comes around early tomorrow to collect it."

"Okay, I'll take care of it. You go up and—"

Butcher's eyes suddenly widened. He reached into the pocket of his jacket, pulled out a slip of paper, and read the words on it: On that day you've got to get the glass out of the store without being caught. He reached for the telephone next to the chair and dialed. The phone rang several times before anyone answered. Butcher asked his question.

"They did, huh?" he said when he'd heard the answer. "About an hour ago?" He slammed the receiver back into the cradle.

He crammed his hand into his jacket pocket and yanked out his checkbook. "Damn!" he said with deep feeling as he started writing in it.

At school the following Monday, Mr. Strang received an envelope with the return address of Butcher's Department Store. There were two things inside. One was a note:

Dear Mr. Strang,

I concede. You outwitted me every step of the way, and as you know, I never welch on a deal. I hope the enclosed will help with your project.

This evening I saw a respectable dignified teacher make a fool of himself in front of hundreds of people just to give a break to a couple of kids. Maybe—just maybe—I've been wrong about you. Anyway, I've been nursing a grudge for almost thirty-five years, and that's too long. Tell Jean and Henry to come and see me when they're getting their travel wardrobes together. I'll give them the best deal in town.

Congratulations,
Wade Butcher

The other item in the envelope was a signed check.

"I lived up to the exact wording of the agreement, of course," said Mr. Strang when he met Henry and Jean during the lunch period. "He said I had

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to get the glass out of the store without being caught. And I did—every scrap of it. All those antics we performed before I broke the glass were just misdirection to keep everybody's attention on me and away from the cleaning man."

"But how did you know the cleaning man would take the pieces of glass outside?" Jean asked.

"It was easy. When I phoned the village building just before accepting Mr. Butcher's challenge, the Sanitation Department assured me that there was trash pickup for the whole of Aldershot on Friday morning. So I was sure that any rubbish that was collected in the department store on Thursday evening would be taken out of the store immediately, before the following morning. I thought I'd have to remind Wade that I'd won, but he figured it out for himself."

"I'm surprised he sent the check, though," Jean went on. "Someone else might have waited to see if you'd planned it that way or if you just realized how lucky you'd been."

"Not Wade Butcher. He can be a hard man to deal with, but he's honest, scrupulously honest."

"Wait a minute." Henry Kerrigan had been examining the check, but now his eyes were on the teacher. "Mr. Strang?"

"Yes, Henry?"

"This check—it's wrong. You asked Mr. Butcher for a thousand dollars, but the check's made out for only nine hundred ninety-two dollars"—he paused—"and sixty-five cents."

"Oh, that. Another example of Mr. Butcher's honesty and attention to detail. It's for a thousand dollars, all right. Minus what the broken glass cost. Seven dollars plus tax."

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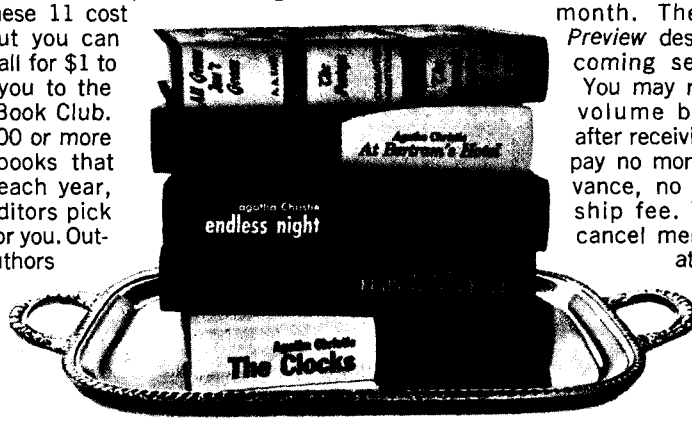

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